

CAT LADY

On a tiny Israeli Moshav (a village cooperative) a sad and lonely woman loves cats too much for the rest of the Moshav members.

I love our Moshav. It's a beautiful place surrounded by rolling hills and a view of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). It's kind of farm land, but we live in proper houses and everything. It's a place where we can run around, visit our friends without booking a playdate, and walk our dogs without our parents worrying. And like every close-knit community, we have our characters. Like the Cat Lady.

I love the Cat Lady. I mean, I don't really talk to her much, but I really love her. They say that she used to have twin boys whom everyone adored, but one died in the war, and the other moved to California. No one ever knew her husband. They say that when her second son left the country, she didn't come out of her house for five years. Five years. And ever since then she's always looked sad, like she was going to burst into tears any minute.

Except when she's near a cat.

Whenever she sees a cat, she just becomes a different person. Honestly. I've seen it. This big, gentle smile begins to spread across her face. From a painful hobble she starts to trip along like a little girl, and I swear it's like her wrinkles get this invisible ironing and she looks about fifty years younger!

Any stray cat—she'll immediately feed it and stroke it and dance around with it like it's a newborn baby.

The thing is that stray cats aren't babies, but they do have babies. Lots of them. Right now I can look out of my window at Cat Lady's house, and there must be at least fifty cats hanging around there, waiting for her to come out. There are always cardboard boxes around her place full of adorable, cuddly kittens. When they're kittens they're always so cute.

Ada next door complained that all the cats were making a mess in her garden. The Cohens down the road said the cats had gotten into their porch and used their furniture as a claw sharpener. The stoop outside the Makolet corner shop always smells like cat pee no matter how many times Yossi cleans it. And all the children of the Moshav refuse to throw out the trash anymore, because whenever they do, a cat suddenly jumps out of the dumpster and frightens them to death.

I wasn't a great fan, either. Just the other day I found a cat outside playing with my favorite doll! And when I tried to take her back, the cat suddenly hissed at me and tried to scratch me!

Last night Mom and Dad came home from a Moshav meeting. They decided they were going to vote on a new bylaw that says no one in the Moshav would be allowed more than two cats per household. They said that Cat Lady just sat there throughout the meeting, looking really sad.

I can just imagine her walking home, with that cat-less, lonely limp. It made me sad. But then, when I'm sad I normally hug my doll, and I couldn't do that because that cat had taken it . . .



GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How would you vote in the Moshav meeting?
- Why?



BACKGROUND

While this story is fictional, the cat problem in Israel is real. In the 1930s, under the British Mandate, cats were brought to Israel to deal with the rat infestation that was plaguing Israel at the time. And ever since then, the cats have reproduced. Today, it is estimated that there are about two million street cats around the country. Public policy and public health experts continually struggle with questions of how to deal with this issue.

In our story, in addition to the public hazard that the cats create, we have a woman who needs to be cared for as well, and cats that ought to be treated humanely.

Jewish texts shed some light on these competing values:

Compassion for those in need: In the Talmud (Masechet Sotah) we are asked to walk in God's ways. In the same way that God is compassionate, so too, we need to be compassionate. Cat Lady certainly needs compassion. Compassion is so important that it is considered a Godly attribute. The fact that the narrator doesn't even use the name of the main character is a sign that at least some level of compassion is missing.

Treatment of animals: Jewish tradition also tells us to treat animals well. The Torah lists many ways in which we must care for animals. In Exodus 20:10 animals are almost likened to humans, in that it is written that animals, like people, must be given a day of rest on Shabbat. In the Talmud (*Baba Metzia* 32b), we learn that we must relieve an animal's burden if it's too much for it.

Keeping our neighborhoods clean: In addition to ancient Jewish sources (such as the Talmud) telling us the importance of keeping our neighborhoods clean, more modern sources do as well. In 1860, the first neighborhood to be built outside of Jerusalem's Old City walls, *Mishkenot Sha'ananim*, was established, and rules for cleanliness were set as well. The bylaws for this then very poor neighborhood, stated: "Every inhabitant of the *Mishkenot Sha'ananim* neighborhood shall command his charges to purge his house on a daily basis of all garbage and any unclean matter; he shall also sprinkle clean water on the floor of the rooms of his house at least once a day." And, "Every inhabitant of the *Mishkenot Sha'ananim* neighborhood shall command his charges not to cast away any garbage in front of his house, and shall clean up all the areas around his dwelling, and throw away the garbage in the designated area and cover it immediately."



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- Are human beings more important than animals such as cats?
- If you feed a stray cat, does that make you responsible for everything it does?
- To what extent should a community be able to make decisions for its members? What communities/groups/organizations have you been a part of that have made choices for their members?
How did this make you feel?



THOUGHTS TO RETURN TO AFTER A NIGHT'S SLEEP

- 1 I wish I'd said ...
- 2 That idea I rejected, now that I think about it ...
- 3 That whole conversation reminded me of ...