

Get Lost (Just a Little Bit)
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Earlier this summer I took my car to the mechanic for a routine checkup. I've been taking my car to the same garage for close to twenty years and the car's detailed history is kept on file. At the checkout, the owner of the garage shared a serious concern. He said: "Last time the odometer showed 82,000 miles. Now, only ten months later, your odometer is at 140,000 miles." The difference was startling. "Can you tell me what you did this past year?" the mechanic prodded. This felt like a *Yom HaDin* moment – an early reminder that Elul and the High Holidays were just around the corner.

"Can you tell me what you did this past year?" his question dropped like a heavenly gavel. Endless carpools passed before my eyes, shabbat grocery lists and trips to one of too many supermarkets, early morning drives to shul, with my eyes barely open. Where has this year gone? I've lost track of so many miles.

"Can you tell me what you did this past year?" the mechanic in the role of heavenly judge nudged.

"Well, I did go on a road trip to Arizona..." I started mumbling... "Arizona?!?" my mechanic exclaimed, "Maybe if you did a road trip to Israel, we'd have something to talk about."

Giving up on me, the mechanic finally threw me a bone: "Let me check with one of our technicians."

"So where did you go this past year?" the technician asked. I'm clearly moving up the heavenly tribunal. "Apparently not to Israel..." I answered sheepishly, without making either one of them laugh.

"Was your car broken into?" – Me: "No."

"Any electric shocks to the vehicle?" – Me: "No."

"Anyone driving late at night without your permission?" – Me: "Well I do have a teenager at home...but...No!"

Left with no choice, the heavenly tribunal called over a third mechanic, and the Beit Din (the court of three mechanics) headed over to my car.

The first mechanic confirmed the number, as did the second. The third mechanic sat behind the wheel until finally a big smile appeared on his face. "The odometer is showing 140,000 kilometers, but if you press the button right over here" – pointing with his finger – "you're at 87,000 miles. Problem solved."

That number made sense, but unfortunately by that time, I was already in deep existential crisis.

"Can you tell me what you did this past year?" Me – No.

The Jerusalem Talmud records an incredible tale (JT Ma'aser Sheni, Ch. 5:56a).

A man was plowing his field in the land of Israel. Suddenly his cow ceased from its work and began running madly. The man started chasing after it. The cow ran, and he ran. It ran, and the man followed it from behind. The Talmud notes that during this entire lengthy pursuit, the distance between the two never changed. Finally, at the end of a very long chase, the man found himself all the way in Babylon. The locals asked him: "When did you leave Israel?" And he replied: "Today." They said to him: "Which path brought you here?" The man turned back and pointed behind him: "This way." They said to him: "Show us [the way]." The man went out and wanted to show them but he did not know the way.

John Lennon sings that, “Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.” But the Jerusalem Talmud points out that life is also what happens to you while you’re busy chasing your own plans. Distracted by the means, many of us lose sight of our end goal. We chase cows and never get to settle the promised land itself. And what is true of cows, is also true of life itself.

In our pursuit of material abundance, we amass possessions that ultimately clutter our lives and complicate our quest for happiness. Amid constant multitasking and a perpetually busy lifestyle, meaningful conversations often take a back seat. In our drive for personal success, we fail to recognize the significance of giving back to our community.

The list goes on and on. We get lost chasing many, many cows. And when we look for our way back, some of us can no longer find it.

The Piazcner Rebbe, known as the Eish Kodesh, provides a powerful allegory (*Derech HaMelech*, Rosh Hashanah, 1925):

Once there was a King who dispatched his son on a mission to a distant realm, tasking him with bringing order to a faraway land. The son agreed on the condition that his father would extend aid whenever necessary. In response, the King shared a secret signal with his son, an alarm to be used in times of crisis. The foreign land the son ventured into was challenging to govern — primitive, rugged, and at times violent. The locals also spoke a language different from that of the King and his son. After some time, a crisis did come up, which prompted the son to remember the alarm signal his father had imparted. The King’s son produced a horn and sounded the alarm, following his father’s instructions. Soon after, the King and his army hastened to the son’s side. Sadly, with the passage of time, the King’s son became more acclimated to the ways of the land. He embraced their customs, he adopted their language, he took on their eating and drinking habits, until gradually he began losing his way. After many years, his native tongue evaded him, the assurance from his father faded from his memory, and the alarm signal slipped his mind...And consequently, the son’s enemies resurfaced once again.

The Eish Kodesh concludes his tale in this dramatic fashion. For a moment, let’ look at this story a bit more closely.

The first part of the story offers hope. When the son initially feels distant and lost, he sounds the alarm, prompting his father's timely intervention.

This segment of the story mirrors pivotal junctures in our own lives. Instances when we've strayed off course, prompting either ourselves or our loved ones to sound the alarm. We've all had fleeting experiences in which God's grandeur or the universe's magnificence inspired us to rethink our humble place in the world. We've also all had significant encounters or personal crises that forced us to recall our authentic selves. These various experiences disrupted our lives like the startling call of the Shofar and ultimately compelled us to reclaim our purpose and direction.

This part of the story also parallels the use of the Shofar during Rosh Hashanah. Its blast startles us. Its call prompts us to seek God's aid or at the very least forces us to reflect on who we once were.

And yet, the subsequent portion of the tale casts us into a realm of uncertainty. The King's offspring has ventured so far astray that he lacks the means to sound the alarm. He's adrift in unfamiliar territory and the agreed-upon signal has faded from memory. In this concluding part of the story, the Eish Kodesh places us in a state of suspension. Will the King’s son sound the alarm? Will he even know how? Does he even recognize his own state of being lost?

Regrettably, this too can mirror our lives.

Years ago, one of my children got lost in a park in Israel. The whole affair took less than ten minutes, but the concern was so grave, even Israel's internal security forces were called into action. Fortunately, our child was speedily found. Years later I asked him how he felt, to which he replied, "Well, I didn't even know that I was lost. I wasn't even looking for help."

Sadly, friendships and marriages could be like that, where we gradually drift apart from people we love, without knowing when or how it occurred. This phenomenon extends to our own selves, where unaware we lose sight of who we once were or what we once aspired to become. When we reach a point of being so profoundly lost that we don't even know how lost we've become, how might we find our way back?

The tale's allusion to Rosh Hashanah, poses the question in this way: What do we do when we no longer know how to blow the Shofar?

Left to ponder the tale's untold ending, two potential scenarios emerge (among numerous). In the first, the son's failure to sound the alarm results in his complete assimilation or enemy-driven demise. And yet, another prospect emerges. Despite the absence of an alarm, the son unearths inner strength, using the crisis to cultivate greater self-resilience. Independently, he retraces his steps and reunites with his father.

And this possibility exists in our own lives as well. We've each encountered moments in which no one but ourselves could guide us back, where the signal went out on our existential GPS system. We all recognize experiences in which no external advice or assistance could or would have been accepted by us. Simply put, there are journeys in life that we must navigate on our own. Like a Rosh Hashanah that falls on Shabbat, the Shofar will not be blown.

Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb recalls a time in his life in which he felt utterly lost, after experiencing "an early mid-life crisis." He had recently moved from Crown Heights to Silver Spring, Maryland after completing a doctorate in psychology and found himself plagued by some religious doubt and challenges. Not knowing what to do, R. Weinreb decided to call the office of the Lubavitcher rebbe. R. Weinreb recalls: "The Rebbe's secretary answered the phone in English, with a simple 'Hello, who's this?'"

R. Weinreb replied, "A yid fun Maryland" (a Jew from Maryland).

R. Weinreb continues his story as follows:

"I told the secretary that I have many questions which I would like to discuss with the Rebbe—questions about what direction my life should take [...]. I explained that I was at a very uncertain stage in my life and I didn't know where to turn.

I spoke in English and, as I was talking, the Rebbe's secretary was repeating and paraphrasing my words in Yiddish [to the Rebbe]. [...]

And then I heard the Rebbe say in the background, in Yiddish: 'Tell him that there is a Jew who lives in Maryland that he can speak to. Der yid hayst Veinreb—his name is Weinreb.' [...]"

R. Weinreb couldn't believe his ears. He recounts: "I was taken aback, and I wanted to hear it again. So when the secretary asked whether I heard, I said no."

The secretary repeated the Rebbe's words: "There's a Jew in Maryland whom he should talk to. His name is Weinreb."

R. Weinreb responded, "But my name is Weinreb!"

And then he heard the Rebbe say: “Oib azoi, zol er visen zayn az amol darf men reden tzu zich – If that’s the case, then he should know that, sometimes, one needs to speak to himself.” [...]

R. Weinreb concludes the story with this reflection: “I believe I understood what the Rebbe was trying to tell me. If I could put words in his mouth, he was saying, ‘You’re looking for answers outside yourself. You’re not a kid anymore; you’re a man. You are thirty years old, you are a father, you are a teacher of Torah. You have to have more self-confidence. It’s time to grow up and listen to yourself. Don’t be so dependent on others. Trust yourself”

(https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/2235925/jewish/Talk-to-Yourself.htm).

In her talk, “Lost and Found, Awakening in the In-Between”, Dr. Kelly Bloom encourages all of us to get lost, well, just a little bit. Dr. Bloom bemoans that “we neglect to make the space for [getting lost]” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jolMunCuapw>). After all, the moment in which we realize that we are lost is itself revelatory. While possibly scary and unsettling, this state of being also creates a liminal space in which we experience newfound freedom. Being lost can ultimately be a deeply generative experience of discovery in general and self-discovery in particular. It propels us to gaze outward and inward, prompting us to raise critical questions that oftentimes give way to inevitable answers.

It turns out that sometimes we need to get lost, even if, for just a little while. Educators and parents in this room understand this insight quite well. Sometimes a good King should refrain from showing up for their child and sometimes a good rebbe doesn’t answer a call.

On this Rosh Hashanah, specifically on this Shabbat Rosh Hashanah, let us take the time to tune in deep inside. Though we may have forgotten how to read the odometer; lost our way while chasing this or that cow; or forgotten how to raise the alarm or sound the Shofar – we may yet still find that all that we need is already within us. We are children of the King, and as such, we are inheritors of divine valor, Godly determination, and majestic essence.

So, on this Rosh Hashanah let us get lost, just a little, and then found – lost and found, lost and found. And ultimately, may we be blessed to always discover more than we expected to find.