

It was late Saturday night at the beginning of my trip to Israel, and I had dropped Pamela and Eliana off at the Jerusalem sound & light show, while Noam and I were going to pick up Lev from the youth hostel where his program was wrapping up. We were supposed to pick him up at 10 pm, as he would continue to travel with us, while his fellow teen travellers were returning to the States, heading to the airport in the middle of the night.

Now, some context here. On this trip to Israel, I played the roles of travel agent, tour guide... and driver for my family. It's the last role that needs a little fleshing out. Israel is an ancient country. People have come to Israel from virtually every place in the world. And the driving styles of Israelis could best be described as a hybrid of New York City taxi driver with professional NASCAR racer. Everyone is convinced they have the right of way, and everyone is convinced they can get their car, van, suv or truck through the narrowest street, or around the sharpest curve - and the vehicles driven by Israelis typically have the scratches, dings and body damage to show for this bravado. Oh, and also - the concept of "one way streets" is considered to be mostly just a suggestion - one that no one would ever listen to, except perhaps some American tourists!

So, Noam and I were on our way to pick up Lev, and my phone died. Not just died, but was beyond resuscitation. Dead, kaput. And, of course, I had been relying on my phone as a gps unit. Now, here I am - on the late side of picking up Lev, and I don't have directions to the youth hostel.

No problem. I had been there with a teen group six years ago, and I was fairly sure I remembered where it was. I would use my expert internal sense of direction to find it, as well as my deep knowledge of the streets of Jerusalem. Well... let's just say neither of those proved to be too much help. Was it near the Biblical Zoo? The Israel Museum? The Keneset? Behind the Rose Garden? I remember it was one of those - but beyond that, I had no clue.

Finally, as my anxiety was starting to build, I decided I had no other choice but to return to the apartment we were renting, boot up the laptop and get on the wifi to find this youth hostel - at which point I would write pen and paper directions for myself - I know, very retro!!!

There was only one problem - I had to find my way back to the apartment. This should have been an easier task. Of the streets of Jerusalem that I am familiar with, the area around the fruit and vegetable market, Machane Yehuda is one of the network of alleys I know the best. Although, driving those alleys, it would seem not as much!

My pulse was racing as I made the turn off of the main street towards the market. I knew I had to get across Jaffa Road at just the right point, and then the entryway to our apartment would be right in front of me. Here we are... this looks like the right turn. I enter a narrow street... And, of course there's an impatient Israeli driver following uncomfortably close behind me.

Feeling pressured to make a decision, I turned left, into an even narrower alley. The driver behind me turns left. Now, I am turning around a tall apartment building. And now, there is a gate directly in front of me... with a red circle and a traffic cone "Ayn Chanayah - No Parking." The impatient Israeli is honking. I am sweating. I panic, and I jump out of the car, engine still

running.

Now, I have to pause the action for just a moment here. Folks have asked me if I am fluent in Hebrew. And the answer is that while my Hebrew was better during the two separate years I lived in Israel, I can communicate like a fairly intelligent ten year old! But I discovered something of interest on this most recent trip. My Hebrew is actually at its best when I am arguing or otherwise agitated. Some day, an expert linguist will explain to me how it is that the foreign language centers of the brain are activated by the emotions of fear and anger!

Okay, so I have hopped out of my car, and now I am storming towards the other car, shouting: "*MAH ATAH ROTZEH MIMEINI?!?!?! What do you want from me?!? I'm LOST!*"

I'm a pretty calm guy. I'm pretty much a personal pacifist. I've never actually been in a fist fight. And I'm pretty sure that's a good thing. And, as I see the Israeli get out of his car, I think to myself "Idiot! What did you just do? Get out of your car? Storm towards an irate Israeli while shouting at him? He's probably Special Forces of Mossad. I'll never be heard from again!"

So, I'm storming towards him: "*MAH ATAH ROTZEH MIMEINI?!?!?! I'm LOST!*" and he, 6' 3" of chiseled Israeli machismo gets out of the car. Looks at me. Assesses the situation. Cracks a half of a smile. And says... (thick Israeli English accent): "Apparently so. You're in my driveway."

"*Atah yechol latet li l'histovev mikan?*" Would you let me turn around from here??? "Be my guest."

At this point, I get back in the car, try to still my nerves enough to turn the car around in this narrow little space. All the while, Noam is in the back seat, CRACKING UP!!! He thought my yelling was the funniest thing he'd ever seen!

Later, when we picked up Pam and Ellie, he recalled the whole situation: "Daddy was lost. Then he got out of the car and said 'SHAMAMAHHH! I'm lost!' and it was so funny!" It became a go-to joke for the rest of our time together: "SHAMAMAHHH! I'm lost!"

Of course, I made it back to the apartment. I got my directions. We rebooted my cell phone - just in time to receive the message from Lev begging me to let him stay an extra hour. I drove this massive rental car through the Byzantine maze of streets all over Israel with such care that I didn't even get charged by the rental company for any scratches - and if you don't believe miracles still happen - that, right there is one, for sure!

So, why do I share this story tonight? (Aside from the desire to go back on my promise at Rosh HaShanah that I wouldn't make these holy days into "what I did on my summer vacation"?)

First: "*MAH ATAH ROTZEH MIMEINI?!?!?! I'm LOST!*"

It all starts with admitting the truth. I'm lost. *MAH ATAH ROTZEH MIMEINI?* What do YOU want from me? I just don't know. I'm lost.

We wander through our lives with so little certainty. Oh, yes, today we all rely on GPS technology. Like you, I have found myself even walking through the streets of an unfamiliar city, staring down at a rectangle of glass and computer chips, and relying on it to tell me - "exactly fifteen feet ahead and on the left, you will reach your destination." But what happens if I get there, and the GPS is wrong. What happens if I am standing exactly where it tells me I am supposed to be, and I still feel lost? Who do I believe - my smart phone or my beating heart?

What ever happened to deliberately WANDERING around a foreign city? To the experience of being lost as a virtue? There is little more invigorating than the honest discovery that is made through blindly wandering in unfamiliar territory - and that goes for cities, relationships, art, science and so much more!

A poet, Jose Alcantara, writes the following:

"If you have a compass, smash it.  
Nothing can point you to true anything, let alone true north.  
Besides - and never forget this - you are trying to get lost.

You may be gone for a long time  
so be sure not to pack food or water.  
It is only the hungry who feed, only the thirsty who are quenched.

...

Write postcards telling everyone of you adventures.  
Be sure to lie, like a fox leaving false tracks.  
Someday they will thank you.

You will not know when you have arrived.  
But if you think you have, you haven't.  
If you think you haven't, you probably have..."<sup>1</sup>

So, there is certainly some value in being lost, in and of itself. We make new discoveries; we find places or things we didn't know we were seeking; we may even end up on a completely different journey that we didn't know we were meant to be on.

This afternoon, we'll read the iconic Yom Kippur story of Jonah fleeing from God's task. In the hull of the ship; in the belly of the great fish; on the shores of Nineveh - Jonah never intended to be in any of these places, but he was just where God needed him. And, sometimes, our wandering takes us - unaware - to the exact places where we need to be. Pause for a moment, and give thanks for some unexpected journey, or piece of your path that you did not know was even a part of your story until you found yourself in it.

Of course - in the story I've shared so far, I was NOT grateful to be sandwiched in between the impatient Israeli driver and the entrance to his driveway, stressing out that I was late picking up

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1. <https://onbeing.org/blog/if-you-have-a-compass-smash-it/>

my son from a place I had no idea how to find.

No. At that moment, I was just simply LOST.

Pulse racing, I had driven from street to street in a neighborhood of Jerusalem that I really only half-way know; and the last thing I wanted to admit - the thing I put off for far too long, even to the point I just started making random turns - I did not want to admit that I was lost.

But once I did, once I could voice those words, my own energy shifted - and so did the energy of the big Israeli, who I'm sure was getting ready to punch me! But, admitting my own failure, my own vulnerability - "I'm lost" - changed the dynamic completely.

I was not lost in a virtuous sense. I was not making lovely discoveries by blindly turning this way and that in the labyrinth of Machaneh Yehudah. I was lost, in need of direction, in need of help. But help would not be forthcoming until I admitted it, until I was able to call out - "I'm lost."

In a spiritual sense, this is a day, this is a season for calling out "I'm lost." For asking, with sincerity of heart, "Give me a little space to turn around." All I need is a little space, just enough to figure out how to get on the right path, because I know that where I am right now - there's a big "do not enter" sign, "no parking," "I can't stay here, but I don't know what else to do!" "*Atah yechol latet li l'histovev mikan?*" Would you just give me a little bit of space so I can turn around? I hear his voice, "Be my guest."

Of course, there's turning around, and then there's TURNING AROUND.

*Teshuvah* - The essence of these days of Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, as well as the time between, called "*Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah* - The Ten Days of Turning Around." This is the time, if ever, to get ourselves back on the right track, to restore the path we are meant to be on, or at least to seek to get closer to some clarity on that question. *Teshuvah* is the Return we seek with those that we've hurt or alienated in this past year; and *Teshuvah* is the Return to our highest essence, the person God has created us as capable of being.

And this is the space - these prayers we will say; the words in the books, in our hearts; the experience of emptying our bellies so that we can re-fill our souls; THIS is the space in which we turn around - and it is narrow, indeed. (11")

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel points out that there is a complement to our search, our trying to find a way in this world, our turning and returning. Judaism, he teaches, insists that we - as human beings - are searching for God; but that similarly, God is searching for us!

The very first question God asks in the Torah is *Ayeka* - Where are you?<sup>2</sup> Intended for the first human beings - as Adam and Eve were hiding in the Garden of Eden, ashamed of their nakedness, their vulnerabilities, their conscious actions - this question continues to echo

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2. Genesis 3:9

throughout eternity: *Ayeka* - Where are you? Heschel writes:

“When Adam and Eve hid from God’s presence, the Lord called: *Where are you?* It is a call that goes out again and again. It is a still small echo of a still small voice, not uttered in words, not conveyed in categories of the mind, but ineffable and mysterious, as ineffable and mysterious as the glory that fills the whole world. It is wrapped in silence; concealed and subdued, yet it is as if all things were the frozen echo of the question: *Where are you?* ... Religion consists of *God’s question and man’s answer*. The way to faith is the way of faith. The way to God is a way of God. Unless God asks the question, all our inquiries are in vain.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of the traditional commentators<sup>4</sup> point out a fairly obvious problem with God’s question to Adam in the Garden of Eden. God is portrayed calling out to the man: “*Ayeka* - Where are you?” But the biblical text must have a concept that this question can not possibly be understood as a literal. God is everywhere and knows everything. Even here, in the Garden of Eden, there’s really no place to hide from God. You can’t disappear into a crowd when you’re the only human beings created so far! So, what is the deeper nature of God’s question?

RaShI replies: “God knows exactly where Adam was - but God nevertheless asks the question *LiKaneis Imo BiDvarim* - in order to enter into conversation with him.”

To enter into conversation. To begin to help process, together with Adam and Eve, the nature of their actions, their failure to follow the correct path, the impact it will have on their journey. *Ayeka* is an opening - an invitation towards the process of *Teshuvah*, of Turning Around.

God’s question is an invitation to Adam and Eve to own up to their behavior, to admit their vulnerability, to acknowledge that they are lost - and, most fitting for our prayers here on Yom Kippur, to enter into a process of *Teshuvah* BECAUSE God wants nothing more than to find them innocent<sup>5</sup>, or at least attempting to get back on the right track. We read earlier in the service:

“You are everything that we praise You for; slow to anger, quick to forgive. You do not wish the death of sinners, but urge them to return from their ways and live. Until the day of death, You wait for them; You accept them at once if they return.”<sup>6</sup>

But, in order to get there, we need to first call out, “I’m lost.” To be vulnerable enough to admit this. The most current research on the topic of vulnerability is that popularized by Brené Brown<sup>7</sup>, who has the following to say about the positive results that come from admitting our failures, acknowledging who we are, how we are made, and what we’ve done. She writes:

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and

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3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 137 (adapted)

4. Beginning with RaShI

5. See for a full exploration of this theme *Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 9*

6. *Mishkan HaNefesh* for Yom Kippur, p. 214

7. For a beautiful animation of this theme, watch this: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwFN6r7Y\\_Sg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwFN6r7Y_Sg)

belonging and joy - the experiences that make us most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.”<sup>8</sup>

I know the story I began with, “*MAH ATAH ROTZEH MIMEINI? I’m LOST!*” is a bit on the trivial and humorous side. Foibles of driving in a foreign country. A light little report from the vacation. A memorable moment for me and my family.

But, on a deeper level, I recognize the symbolic nature of how hard it is for me to admit that I am lost. To come to the point of seeing that there is JUST ENOUGH SPACE to turn around. To pray that I have the ability to do so, that I’m given the space, that I have the courage - because it is not easy, and it is not even always possible, if only in this moment. But we try; we do our best; somehow, if we honestly attempt this turning, it must be “enough.”

Here. Together. And as individuals - let us use this space and time in order to make ourselves vulnerable, towards the goal of discovering, re-kindling the “infinite power of our light.”

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8. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Hazelden Publishing, 2010, p. 6