

RH 78: 18 Inches

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If you've known me for any time at all you've seen me do this. And my glasses always turn up, generally within arm's reach (occasionally, embarrassingly, on my head or tucked into my shirt). Turns out there is even a science – or a pseudo-science that posits an 18 inch rule: nearly any object you're looking for is within 18 inches of exactly where you would expect it to be. Professor Solomon, a Findologist (yes, really) posits 12 principles for finding lost objects including “you're looking at it right now”, “It's where it's supposed to be” (or, according to the helpful correlation, if the object has traveled it's gone no more than 18 inches) and my favorite, “Look once, look well.”{As Dorothy discovers in the Wizard of Oz} we usually don't have to look very far. Generally what we seek has been there all along. We just have to look well.

We see examples of this 18 inch rule throughout Jewish tradition. Just this morning we read the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. If we allow ourselves to fully enter the narrative we might notice our own growing anxiety, even desperation when the water runs out, and, unable to face what will come next, Hagar “left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance...for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’” And as any parent might, Hagar bursts into tears at that terrible moment when she realizes that without water, she and her son will die a terrible death.

And then the angel speaks to her: “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the cry of the boy where he is...” An angel calling you by name, telling you not to worry is one thing. But then: “And God opened her eyes and she saw a

well of water.” Notice God did not poof! the well into existence. “God opened her eyes and she saw the well.” It had been there all the time, right where she needed it to be. She just had to “look once and look well.”

It cannot be coincidental that tomorrow we will read of Avraham, spared from sacrificing Yitzhak when at the last possible moment, he sees that ram that has been there all along.

Much of what we most need is closer than we might have thought. For some of us, that’s the case in a literal, physical sense. We don’t have to go far to find the friendship and wisdom we need in our most trying moments. Within these very halls, among our community is a source of strength and wholeness. In times of sorrow, our feet lead us to this place to gather for support and consolation. And in moments of joy we invite our friends to join us here in celebration, to raise a glass in l’chaim.

In 1982 I went out for dinner with a group of friends, some close friends, some I was just getting to know. It was a Chinese restaurant so of course at the end of the meal the waiter brought fortune cookies for everyone. The guy I was sitting next to taught me the etiquette: You have to take the cookie closest to you – that’s the fortune that was meant for you. It happens that I kept that fortune: “Stop searching everywhere; happiness is right next to you”. I don’t often quote fortune cookies, but I note the wisdom of that particular one as it proves my point. That guy sitting next to me: Last week he and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary.

I want to explore a bit more this science of finding lost objects: what else are we searching for that might be close by? We are living in an unsettled time.

Consider what we have never seen before: weaponized cars that mow down unsuspecting citizens. Gatherings and counter gatherings that intimidate and bully opponents. We have seen neighborhood conversations, community get-togethers and family Thanksgiving dinners fall by the wayside because we cannot speak to one another civilly.

We may wonder how we got here, but more importantly we are searching for a way back. When the US Constitution was written but not yet ratified in 1787, George Washington felt compelled to write a letter to Congress, knowing that the Constitution and indeed the Union, was on shaky footing: “the Constitution which we now present is the result of a spirit of amity and that of mutual deference and concession....we hope and believe that it may promote the lasting welfare of that country so dear to us all, and to secure her freedom and happiness, as is our most ardent wish.”

We are searching for a way back to that spirit of amity and mutual deference and concession – we are searching for it in our hearts and in our nation, and I’m telling you I believe the path is very close. We have to look well, but we don’t have to look far. In these seemingly unprecedented times we need only look inward, to our most eternal values, to find the path to decency and civility and holiness.. Let’s look to the core of who we are and what we have been taught.

Here are a few of those values that are so close they have become intrinsic to our identity if only we look well to see them anew.

{1}We have to remember the inherent holiness of every human being. This we learn from our very creation. It is what Rabbi Yitz Greenberg defines as a

fundamental principle of our religion: “that every human being is created in the image of G and therefore has three fundamental qualities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness.”

{Second} We are obliged to pursue justice. Tzedek tzedek tirdof: “Justice, justice you shall pursue”. Why is tzedek, justice doubled in this verse?

Bachya ben Asher explains, “The double emphasis means: Justice under any circumstance, whether to your profit or loss, whether in word or in action, whether to Jew or non-Jew.” And the choice of the word tirdof, pursue, also is instructive. Tirdof evokes the Egyptians’ pursuit of the fleeing Israelites (Vayirdof acharie b’nai Yisrael) and is used throughout the Bible in descriptions of battle. We are to chase after, to pursue justice with an urgency associated with life and death.

{Third} We must not stand idly by the blood of our brother. And we have to remember our mandate dan l’caf z’chut to judge kindly others, particularly, those with whom we disagree.

And as we search for our path to amity and concession and to decency, there is one value that is closest to us, that most defines who we are. That is the command, given over and over, to protect the vulnerable. I want to focus on this command. Torah groups together the stranger, the widow and the orphan and singles them out for special protection. *You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me. (Ex 22:20-21). When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go the stranger the fatherless and the widow.*

(Deut 24:19). These three types, the widow the orphan and stranger are at particular risk in the ancient world, with no designated protector or provider, no solid claim to the benefits of family or community. And so we are expected to extend singular attention to their well-being.

Why are we commanded so many times to protect these vulnerable members of our society? Because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We know what it is to be unprotected and friendless.

Rabbi Shai Held writes, “The Torah is appealing to the collective memory of the Jewish people: the formative story about which we orient our collective life is about our harrowing sojourn in Egypt and our eventual miraculous redemption by God. We should not oppress the stranger because as a people we remember what oppression can mean. Torah’s urgent call for empathy must animate and intensify your commitment to the dignity and well-being of the weak and vulnerable.”

It is not enough to *feel* empathy. Standing in someone else’s shoes is only the first step; there must be some outcome. Elie Weisel taught: “We remember our hunger so as to eliminate starvation. We remember our anguish so as to proclaim the right of men and women everywhere to live without fear.”

But what if we don’t remember our hunger or our oppression? I have often wondered if the reason Torah teaches us over and over again to protect the vulnerable is because we may have forgotten our own experience as outsiders. Our days of slavery and oppression were a very long time ago. We may have grown fat and comfortable. We may have moved from the margins of society to the very center and lost track of what it felt like to live on the fringes. That is why Torah is so

rich in reminders – this is our core story, the very essence of what it means to be a Jew: To know that our history demands of us radical empathy. That mandate to radical empathy is in our history, in our text, in our very DNA.

It is right here, inside us to recognize the holiness of each human being, to pursue justice, to judge others favorably and to put ourselves in the place of others.

Sometimes I write a sermon because I believe there's something we all need to consider, or to work on. And sometimes I have to write a sermon for myself, because I know I need to work on something. I do not struggle to feel empathy for the stranger the orphan and the widow. The downtrodden arouse my sympathy and I can easily see myself in the position of vulnerability.

My struggle begins when I ask myself if I can feel empathy not only for the downtrodden, the most vulnerable, but for those who are not victims, Can I feel empathy for those who do not arouse my pity. What about those who are not vulnerable but whose opinions and values seem in conflict with our own? Are we able to empathize with someone whose politics we abhor? Can we acknowledge the humanity and dignity of someone who aligns with parties and policies that conflict with our own? Empathy gets really tough here. There are some shoes we don't want to wear.

Writer and educator Eric Liu admits that such radical empathy may be problematic: "To some people" he writes, "the idea of radical empathy is dangerously squishy, a slide down the slope to moral relativism. They fear that understanding the heart of another person (particularly the enemy) will lead to an obliteration of distinctions between self and other, between right and wrong."

That I would say is a misreading of our mandate. Our call to empathy allows us to maintain distinctions, to know right from wrong even as we acknowledge the dignity of those who disagree with us. Empathy will allow us to disagree without demonizing.

Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, representing two dominant conflicting Jewish schools of thought, disagreed about many things. About most things: Marriages that Beit Shammai declared forbidden Beit Hillel declared permitted. Utensils that Beit Shammai pronounced unclean, Beit Hillel pronounced clean. And don't get started on how we're supposed to light our chanukiah. And yet we read in the Talmud, Although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed, Beit Shammai did not, nevertheless, refrain from marrying women of the families of Beit Hillel nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying those of Beit Shammai. (Yevamot 13b). The disagreements were substantial, but they did not allow Bet Shammai and Beit Hillel to demonize one another. They did not lose sight of each other's humanity, or of their connection to one another. They showed how we may empathize even with those who oppose our strongest beliefs.

The day will come when we are ready for healing and reconciliation in our nation. That work, reconciliation, will be a mighty challenge. But if we have demonized and alienated those with whom we disagree, the work will become impossible. If we are not careful we risk putting reconciliation out of reach.

Radical empathy, honoring the dignity of each person, pursuing justice, judging others generously.... These values form the path to more than civility (although that would be a nice start). They form the path to fashioning a society of

mutual respect, of safety for the most vulnerable, of communal well-being. It's a tall order and we may wonder if it's beyond our grasp.

So let me remind you of a passage we read just over a week ago in the Torah portion Nitzavim. "Surely this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it."

Lo bashamayim hi. It is not in the heavens. Our way back to our finest selves as persons and as a people and as a nation is right here. We don't have to look far. We just have to look well.