

Noticing the Path

Parashat Ki Teitzei

So, a week ago, I found myself in a bike shop looking to buy a bike about 45 minutes before Shabbat services. Why? It's a bit of a story.



I was in St. Louis, taking Ari to college, and had the special opportunity to stay for Shabbat.

Ari realized that as a committed bike rider, he really wanted to have a bike to ride around the campus and in the large park next door. So, just before the egalitarian services began, Ari and I started looking for a bicycle.

We walked by a student business that was renting bikes: \$299 for a mediocre bike. I was impressed with these students' entrepreneurial spirit, but we knew we could do better. We started calling local bike stores: \$1,000 - \$10,000 for a new bike! Yikes!

We decided to drive over to another store nearby. They had a \$500 bike that was not bad, but it was still too pricey. We asked if they had any used bikes. They showed us 5 pretty lousy ones.

"Any others?"

"Not really."

"Would any show up?"

"Maybe if someone traded a better one in..."

"Is there any chance you might have something else? Maybe... like in the back of the store?"

The clerk's eyes widened a bit, "Well, I do have this old bike that I just took apart, but I'm not sure you'd want it."

We took a look. It didn't look great - it was missing its crankset and its pedals, and it was pretty old.



But, we looked more closely - it was an old Trek 1000. I had raced on a Trek 1000 in college and this one had the same frame, but it had new, non-racing, thin tires and flat handlebars.

"I'm putting it back together."

"How much do you want for it?"

"I'll take 100 bucks."

Ari and I looked at each other.

"We'll take it." 😊

It was one of those moments where you think you had just won the lottery.

Some of the stress of moving into school lifted and we entered Shabbat on a high.

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But underneath this lucky find, this *metziah* moment, as it is known in Yiddish, was the simple fact that transitions are hard. I realized that behind the search for the bike was the fact that I was not sure what exactly we needed to find or how I could help my son.

Looking back at that afternoon, I realized I was feeling a lot - Ari was going to college and I would miss him. Moving him into his dorm, I was

anxious for him. Would he find friends? What would his roommates be like? What classes should he take?

Ari is on a journey into a new phase, and I, as his *Abba*, as his dad, was also on a journey.

Taking a child to school is a liminal moment, as is starting school, a new job, retirement, moving, celebrating a Bar-Mitzvah...

You are leaving one place and entering another. And in that in-between, you are not entirely in either space.

That can be unsettling.

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This is a Torah reading, a *parashah* filled with laws, and their purpose is to help us live up to the values of morality and kindness.

The thread underlying the numerous commandments is about how to be a good person, a *mensch*.

But the Torah embeds within these laws other teachings, and I want to share a subtle one this morning.

In several places in the *parashah*, we find the theme of going on a journey. The reading begins with going out into a war - *ki teitzei la'milhamah*.



A journey to war is serious business. And the reading continues with all kinds of journeys. The most common word used in the *parashah* is “*baderekh*” - on the way or on the journey. How should we act when we are on a journey?

For example, when the Torah discusses the dangerous nations of Amon and Moav, the text states, “They did not greet you with bread and water *baderekh* when you left Egypt.” (DT 23:5).

This was a vulnerable time for the Israelites.

Baderekh is also mentioned in connection to Miriam.

At the end of the reading, we find “*baderekh*” twice more as the Torah reminds us to wipe out Amalek, the paradigmatic embodiment of evil. “Remember what Amalek did to you *baderekh*, when you left Egypt, how he happened upon you *baderekh*” (Devarim 25:17-18). This is when the Israelites were most vulnerable.

And again, we find it with animals: “Do not see the donkey of your brother or his ox falling *baderekh* - on the road, on the journey...you shall stand [the donkey] (them) up with him” (Devarim 22:4).

Ibn Ezra, the great Spanish commentator, points out that the mitzvah of aiding one in need — even if it’s only the needs of that person’s animal — is immediately followed by the commandment of *shiluaḥ hakein*, the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird, before taking its eggs.

Where does this happen?

“*Baderekh* - on the journey.”

That’s where you should take extra care to look out for animals.

The use of this word: *baderekh* is fascinating to me.

In a reading full of laws, the thread that binds many of these laws is being on a journey.

So, what’s the deeper teaching here?

When we are on a journey, when we are in transition, notice that it’s not the destination that should be our only focus, but where we are *baderekh*, where we are on the way, in that moment.

When we are on a journey, we should notice. Notice. Notice how we treat the animals we encounter. Notice how others treat us.

In those liminal, dangerous, uncertain places, we need the most care, and perhaps the most laws to drive the point home.

These are the most critical and complicated places.

When you are there - *baderekh*, pay attention.

Our earliest spiritual ancestors in the Torah were shepherds - they paid attention to the details, like where their animals were, how their animals were doing, changes in the weather, or the appearance of predators.



And they also were aware of the awe and beauty that the natural world provides.

Often, we don't check in with others and see how they are feeling or how they are doing.

And even more so, we don't check in with ourselves.

We are focused more on our destination than the actual journey:

But, it's that awareness that is the key to being a moral person. We need to know where we are and what we are doing - especially *baderekh*.

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A couple of days later, when it was time to leave and say a final goodbye to Ari, we went on a long walk in Forest Park. It's a huge, beautiful space that includes an art museum, a zoo, and a golf course. It also has running and biking lanes that encircle the park - Ari was very excited about those.

As we walked, we noticed a waterfall and stopped to look at it. We



saw people taking professional photos in front of a beautiful backdrop. Next to it, there were stairs, which we climbed onto a path in the woods. A huge bird with an incredible wingspan flew onto a branch 20 feet from us.

We thought it was a hawk, but when we came closer, we saw that it was an owl, watching us with its rotating head.

It was a wow moment. A find in the forest - *baderekh*.

We smiled and fully took in that moment. It opened us up to deeper feelings of both the sadness and excitement, the anxiety and hope we were both feeling as we said goodbye.

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When we go out - *ki teitzei* - let us not focus only on where the *derekh* - the way - is taking us, but on the journey itself.

May our lives be filled with *drakhim* - paths of peace, paths of awareness, paths of goodness.