

The Lost Child

Category: Devarim, Ki Setzei

The real meaning of the “rebellious son.”

The Missing Camper

Last week, at a Jewish camp in Brooklyn, they discovered that a six-year-old child — Yosef Shapiro — had disappeared. The entire camp had gone to visit a certain park, and upon their return, they realized that he hadn't gotten onto the bus for the trip back to camp. It was about 3:00 PM when they discovered he was gone.

They immediately called the police and began a search. Hundreds of volunteers stopped everything to comb through the park and the neighboring area. They went through the entire area, calling “Yosef, Yosef” — to no avail.

As the hours passed, more and more volunteers joined the teams. The sky began to darken, and it was about to rain. The six-year-old had eaten anything since the early afternoon — at least — and there was also the possibility that he had been kidnapped. They began to seriously consider all sorts of horrible possibilities, when suddenly, more than six hours after his disappearance, he was found half asleep, half fainted, under a bush.

At that very moment, a torrential downpour occurred. But the crowd of volunteers was so excited that they broke out into a joyous dance; people told each other Mazal Tov! It was an open miracle.

The next day, they interviewed the person that had found the child. His name was Victor Shine; he is in his sixties, and just recently married off his youngest child. He said that he first saw on social media that a child was missing and that prayers were requested, so he immediately recited a chapter of Tehillim.

Then he saw that they were asking for volunteers. At first, he thought, “There are certainly many young volunteers; what could I possibly contribute?” A moment later, he remembered that he also has a six-year-old grandchild who was very cute and loved by everyone in the family. What would he do if it was his own grandchild?

At that moment, Yosef Shapiro became his own grandchild. He decided that he needed to join the search. He took a flashlight, got into his car and drove to the park, where he approached the operations center which was organizing the search.

They told him to wait for a new group to form, but he was restless. He decided to go right into the park. He went around and began yelling, "Yosef, Yosef, where are you? I have pizza for you!" He was trying to get into the head of a six-year-old. On the way, he paired up with another search member, and together they went around searching.

They searched the park for an hour and a half, but as the day grew dark he decided to return to the same area where he had arrived. On his way back, he saw a dirt path which led to the depths of the park which had a lot of thick vegetation. He decided to try that path. He walked down the path, and it was totally quiet.

He began yelling, "Yosef, Yosef," when suddenly he heard a call, "Ta!"

Turning to his friend, he asked, "Did you hear what I heard?"

"Yes."

They called out again, but they didn't hear any response. They called the detectives of the NYPD team that were involved in the search, and fifteen minutes later they brought a special unit with a truck with strong projectors to light up the entire area. At 9:20, they found the boy safe and sound.

Is It Really a Rebellious Son?

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the *Ben Sorer Umoredh*, the "Rebellious son." This is a son who steals money from his parents to guzzle wine and devour meat, and we know that his future is destined to be in robbery. The Torah says that his parents are to take him to the court to have him punished. "His father and mother should grab him and bring him out...and say to the elders of this city: our son here is rebellious; he does not listen to our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard" (21:20).

The sages present a great number of conditions which need to be confirmed before ascertaining that a child is actually this "rebellious son." He can be

punished only if all those conditions are met.

For example: if one of his parents is missing a hand, or is an invalid, or mute, blind, or deaf, he cannot be prosecuted. This is derived from the verse itself. “His father and mother should grab him” — they must be able to grab him. “And bring him out” — they can’t be lame. “And say” — they can’t be mute. “Our son here” — they can’t be blind. “Does not listen to our voice” — they can’t be deaf. (Sanhedrin 71a).

At first glance, it seems bizarre. Is the son absolved of his actions because his parents have a handicap?

The explanation:

What’s behind these conditions is a challenge to the parents.

The Talmud says that nobody is born a “rebellious son.” Whenever a child reaches a state of crime and bad behavior, we need to check his background. What brought him to that situation? Were his parents lame? Did they hold him by the hand and lead him down the correct path? Or perhaps were they deaf or blind? Why didn’t they hear his call for help, whether he used words or not?

When he came home from school upset, did they see him? They may have been busy with very important matters, but did they overlook the most important thing that was entrusted to them?

It’s very likely that his parents have a hand in his current state and in such a case, we can not punish the boy.

The Shofar’s Call

We are now approaching Rosh Hashanah. The Baal Shem Tov famously explained the idea of blowing the shofar with a parable:

When the beloved only child of a king reached adulthood, his father decided to send him far away to learn the ways of other nations and gain from their wisdom.

He gave him money and whatever he would need, and sent him off on his way. The son wandered to a faraway land, where he connected with the populace,

learned their language and culture, and soon became one of their own.

Years passed. One day, he suddenly remembered about his father, the king, and was overcome by terrible longing. He decided that he needed to go home. He left everything, and traveled the long journey back to his father's city. As he approached his father's palace, overcome with emotion, he was suddenly stopped by the palace guards.

"Who are you?" they asked.

To his shock and consternation, he realized that he had forgotten the language of his homeland. He tried to gesture to them that he was the king's son, but they laughed at him and chased him away. In their eyes, he was just another crazy person, dressed in strange clothes and speaking a strange language.

In pain and desperation, he began crying and yelling, "Father, help me!"

His father, who happened to be in the courtyard, immediately recognized his son's voice and ran to embrace him.

The Baal Shem Tov explained that the soul of a Jew is sent away from his father's home — in heaven — and dispatched into this physical world. As it often happens, the son gets so involved in his day-to-day life that he forgets that he is the prince, the son of the King of all kings — G-d Himself.

On Rosh Hashanah, when the lost son comes back home and claims to be the son of the king, he cannot even remember the language. He doesn't have the words to turn to his Father in Heaven, so he simply cries out, "Father, help me!" Always, his Father recognizes his voice and opens the door for him.

The Rebbe often said that G-d treats us with "measure for measure." Let's not be deaf; let's open our ears to hear the cry of a Jew yelling, "Father"; let's hear the cry of the souls that are searching for inspiration. We all have what to offer; you can invite another person for Rosh Hashanah dinner, or even wish them a good year, reminding them that a new Jewish year had arrived.

When we will hear their cry, G-d will hear our cry, "Avinu Malkeinu," and grant us a sweet new year.