

**Life out of Balance**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Day Rosh Hashanah 5768**  
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In the Torah reading this morning, God tells Avraham to take his son Isaac and go to “the mountain, Moriah, which God would show him, and there to offer up his only son Isaac as an offering to God. And Avraham took the two lads and Isaac and the wood for the offering, and he went to the place of which God spoke. And then the Torah says a curious thing: *Bayom hashlishi vayisa Avraham et eynav vayar et hamakom merachok*. And on the third day Avraham looked up – he raised his eyes – and he saw the place from a distance.

On the third day he looked up. What in the world was Avraham looking at for three days? For three days he traveled toward Mount Moriah. It was right in front of his eyes, and yet he didn't see it: God's holy mountain, the place which according to the sages was the cornerstone from which the world was created, the place Avraham would bind Isaac to the altar, the place where the holy Temple would be built and from which God's spirit flows out and permeates the whole world. According to our tradition the Temple mount is the most beautiful, the most holy, the most important place in the universe, and yet until he looked up on the third day, Avraham did not see it. Why? Let me answer that question with a story:

This past spring the internationally renowned musician Joshua Bell took up his place at the L'Enfant Metro station in Washington DC early one morning as commuters headed to work. Three days before, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where merely pretty good seats went for \$100. Shortly after his Metro performance, Joshua Bell was awarded the Avery Fisher Prize recognizing him as the greatest classical musician in America. But on this one day Joshua Bell was just a street performer. His appearance was part of an experiment. The question being researched: Would people stop and listen?

Mind you, this street performer was playing an original Stradivarius violin, an instrument crafted in 1710 that is considered to produce the finest music in the world. He played such extraordinary acclaimed numbers as Bach's Chaconne, Ave Maria and Manuel Ponce's Estrellita. It turns out that the acoustics in the metro station are very good, and the air was filled with melody, magic and emotion. The violin is often compared to the human voice, and in this man's masterly hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang – ecstatic, sorrowful, pleading, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous. So what happened?

In the forty three minutes that Joshua Bell played, a mere seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a whopping total of \$32 and change. Another 1,070 people hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look.

How could that be? How is it possible for one of the world's greatest musicians to use one of the world's greatest instruments to play some of the world's most acclaimed music and barely anyone pays attention? That the likes of Joshua Bell never drew a crowd, not even for a second?

*Vayar et hamakom merachok* – Why didn't the people see Joshua Bell? I want to propose three reasons why Joshua Bell went unnoticed that spring morning.

The first reason why people did not stop to hear Joshua Bell is that they just didn't have the time. Many of those people just had somewhere else they had to be. That was the case for Sheridan Parker, a young mother whose son Evan was so taken with the music that he wanted to stop and listen. But Evan's mother was on a schedule. She had to drop Evan off at school and rush back to work in time for a meeting. So Evan's mother gave him a lesson that morning. Stepping into the line of vision between Bell and her son she whisked Evan away. No time to appreciate the music, my child, we have a schedule to keep.

And we can relate to Sheridan Parker. We all have schedules to keep. Places we have to be, things we have to do. We would like to partake in so many meaningful experiences. We really would. But there is just no time. No time to stop and listen to heart stirring music pouring forth from someone's soul. No time to sit and watch a sunrise or sunset. No time to sit and listen – really listen – as our children and our spouse tells us about their day. No time to visit our parents. No time to stop and help someone who is in distress. We would pray to God each day, but there just is no time to get to minyan; no time to put on tefillin, to recite a psalm. We would like our children to come to Religious School more regularly. We don't want them to miss. We know how important the time they spend in synagogue is to the formation of their Jewish identity. But they have to be at soccer, dance, basketball, karate and music lessons. There is just no time.

*Vayar et hamakom meyrachok.*

Of course the truth we do not want to admit is that we would make the time to see, to hear, to act if these things were priorities in our lives. The second reason that people did not notice Joshua Bell is that music just wasn't their priority. A hundred feet away, across the arcade, was the lottery line, sometimes five or six people long. They had a very good view of Bell, if they had just turned around. But no one did. Not in the entire 43 minutes. They just shuffled forward toward that machine spitting out numbers. They were not interested in the music; they were focused on winning the lotto. Keep your eyes on the prize as they say.

JT Tillman was in that lotto line. He remembers every single number he played that day – 10 of them, \$2 apiece, for a total of \$20. He doesn't recall what the violinist was playing, though. When asked about it afterward, Tillman said, "I didn't think nothing [sic] of it – just a guy trying to make a couple of bucks." Tillman said he would have given Bell one or two dollars, but he spent all his cash on lotto. When he was told that he stiffed one of the best musicians in the world, he laughed. "Is he ever going to play around here again?"

"Yeah," the reporter replied, "but you're going to have to pay a lot to hear him." "Darn." Tillman was upset to think that he had missed out on such a unique opportunity, but at the time he was so lost in his pursuit of lotto that he was oblivious to what was happening around him. Of course JT Tillman didn't win the lottery. But think about it, Joshua Bell gets paid \$1000/minute to play. JT Tillman could have won big if he had only stopped to look and listen. That wasn't his priority.

Appreciating good music is not the only thing that fails to make it to the top of our priority lists. How else can you explain the words Edna Souza, the Brazilian shoe-shine lady who worked that day, a short distance from Joshua Bell? Edna is normally irritated by street musicians but she liked Bell's music. Still, she was *not* surprised that people rushed blindly by. She nods sourly toward a spot near the top of the escalator: "Couple of years ago, a homeless guy died right there. *Right there*. He just lay down there and died. The police came, an ambulance came, and no one even *stopped* to see or *slowed down* to look. "People walk up the escalator, they look straight ahead. Mind your own business, eyes forward. Everyone is stressed. Do you know what I mean?"

*Vayar et hamakom merachok:*

There is one more reason why people failed to pay attention to Joshua Bell. Sometimes we just don't see what's right in front of us because it is *out of context*.

Mark Leithauser, a senior curator at the National Gallery, put it this way: "Let's say I took one of our more abstract masterpieces, say an Ellsworth Kelly, and removed it from its frame, marched it down the 52 steps that people walk up to get to the National Gallery, past the giant columns, and brought it into a restaurant. It's a \$5 million painting. And it's one of those restaurants where there are pieces of original art for sale, by some industrious kids from a local art school, and I hang that Kelly on the wall with a price tag of \$150. No one is going to notice it. An art curator might look up and say: 'Hey, that looks a little like an Ellsworth Kelly. Please pass the salt.'"

Sure, Joshua Bell is one of the greatest musicians ever to live. On stage he collects \$1000 for every minute he plays. But on that day he was like an Ellsworth Kelly painting in a ten-cent coffee shop. Bell – wearing blue jeans, a long sleeve t-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap – positioned himself against a wall in the metro station, alongside a large trash can. The hall swarmed with the footsteps and chatter of passersby rushing off to work, accompanied by a cacophony of ringing cell phones. At the top of the metro escalators sat the shoe-shine stand and a busy kiosk that sells newspapers, lottery tickets and a wall-full of *nisht-fer-d'kinder* magazines. This was *not* Severance Hall. Who would expect such an *extraordinary* encounter in such an *ordinary* place?

But that is exactly the point, isn't it? Extraordinary moments occur *all* around us, *all* the time, and we *miss* them. We miss them because we are in too much of a rush to get somewhere else to even notice where we are. We miss them because we have lost our appreciation for beauty, our sense of the holy, our responsiveness to the needy; because

the *faster* we walk through life the *narrower* our vision becomes until all we can see is *ourselves*.

*Vayar et hamakom merachok:*

That's the story of Joshua Bell, Now let's talk about Avraham. His vision too had become narrow. He was so focused on his task as the founder of this new people and on his covenant with God that he lost track of what was truly important – his family. Do you know what happens when Sarah wakes up to find that Avraham has taken their only son to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him to God? She has a heart attack. She is so grief stricken that she collapses on the spot. How could a loving father do such a thing to his child? How could he believe that this was what God really wanted? Sarah could not imagine a world without her beloved son Isaac. The thought was so painful that she perished on the spot.

But what of Avraham's priorities? What was of ultimate importance to him? Was his son so insignificant that he could so easily give him up? You will undoubtedly say, "Wait a minute, rabbi. Wasn't Avraham carrying out God's will?" No, not according to some of our commentators. The Alter Ger Rebbe, in his commentary Sefat Emet, suggests that this was not what God wanted at all. This was indeed a test. And Avraham fails it. The test was not to see if Avraham would sacrifice his only son. It was to see if Avraham would resist, if he would stop and think about what was truly important to him, rather than just blindly carrying out his duties. It was to see if Avraham would show the same love for his family that he showed for the strangers of Sodom and Gemorra when he so courageously argued for their lives.

Just as Avraham initially fails to see the mountain, so too Avraham fails to see what God is asking of him until it is almost too late. He fails to see it until the final moment, when Isaac is bound to the altar and the knife is raised. The angel calls out Avraham, Avraham! Do not touch the lad! And at that moment we read that Avraham raised his eyes and he saw – the same word we encountered earlier regarding his sudden perception of the mountain – he saw a ram caught in the thicket. But he saw much more. In that moment, looking into his son's eyes Avraham sees what Isaac truly means to him, he sees what is really important in life, and everything changes.

*Vayar et hamakom me-rachok.*

And that is why we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, because sometimes we too need help to see what is right in front of our eyes. The blast of the ram's horn is meant to remind us of the ram that Avraham sacrificed in place of Isaac. It is meant to shake us, to awaken us, to open our eyes to what has been right there in front of us all along.

One of my favorite movies is the 1982 avant garde classic, "Koyaanisqatsi." The wordless, darkly brilliant film is about the frenetic speed of modern life. Backed by the minimalist music of Philip Glass, director Godfrey Reggio takes film clips of Americans going about their daily business, but speeds them up until they resemble assembly-line

machines, robots marching lockstep to nowhere. If you watch the video of the crowds moving past Joshua Bell in L'Enfant Metro station, the Philip Glass soundtrack fits it perfectly. "Koyaanisqatsi" is a Hopi word. It means "life out of balance."

Our lives are out of balance. The purpose of the shofar is to bring us back into balance, to open our eyes and help us reorganize our priorities so that we can hear the music in life and can respond from the heart to its rhythms and melodies. To do so we have to do three things. The first is we have to slow down and make time. The second is we have to re-evaluate our priorities. The third is we need a context, a frame for our lives that enables us to recognize that which is of ultimate and lasting value. For us as Jews, that frame is the mitzvot, the commandments of which I spoke yesterday. The commandments of Torah give form and shape and direction to our lives.

The shofar is our Joshua Bell. Is it any wonder then that each day of Rosh Hashanah we will sound the shofar 100 times? Our sages said that we sound it 100 times to represent the 100 blessings a Jew is to recite every day. It reminds us of our need to appreciate the world around us and respond to it, to respond to God's divine call, the call to meaning, the call to justice.

But I want to suggest another reason. We need to hear it 100 times because we *fail* to hear it the first 99 times. Like the passersby in that Metro Station we hear the sound but we do not really hear it. Rather than stopping and letting it resonate in our soul we struggle to keep moving, praying that we will not be too affected, that it will not slow us down. Not today. (shake head) Maybe another day. Not today. Too much to do. Too much to do.

This Rosh Hashanah let us stop for just a moment, lean up against the side of the proverbial Metro station, put our life on hold, and listen, really listen. Maybe, just maybe, somewhere deep in the wail of the shofar we will hear Sarah weeping over her son she thought she had lost. Maybe we will hear Avraham calling out to Isaac, "I am sorry. I should have seen you. I should have heard you. I should have been there for you." Maybe somewhere deep in the shofar we will hear the cry of our mother, our father, our sister, our brother, our neighbor, the stranger, the voice of God crying out to us, challenging us to break free from the shackles of our routine and to *connect*, really connect with those things that are truly most important in this world.

May we heed the sound of the shofar, and may it bring us all blessing for the New Year.