Waze Can’t Get You There

by

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 *...only at the place that Hashem, your God, will choose from among all your tribes to place His name shall you* l’shichno tidreshu *(seek out His Presence and come there)*

 -Devarim 12:5

We are told to seek God’s presence [*tidreshu*]and come to that place that He will choose for us.  What, in this context, does it mean to “seek”? The *posuk* references *HaMakom*,the Temple in Jerusalem (preceded by the Mishkan in Shiloh) but what exactly are we seeking if not the place, the House of God itself?

Ramban suggests that “seeking” means when one comes up to the Beit Hamikdash in Jerusalem he should ask of people along the way, “Where is it? Which road leads me to the House of God?”  These questions are not asked as one who is lost. Even if the traveler *knows* the way he should nevertheless *actively* inquire regarding the best route to get to God. In this way, he generates excitement and enthusiasm in himself and in those he asks.  This, Ramban says, is “seeking out” – *tidreshu.*

The message is, never depend on autopilot to get to the House of God! Yes, arriving at the destination matters but the journey itself demands mindfulness; it requires a yearning, a desire to seek out. *Each time* you travel that road, you must find the same energy and excitement as the first time. The power is in the *seeking* not only the finding.

The Torah goes on to tell us that we should, “…seek out His presence and come there – *u’vaata shamah*.” The “*shamah*” speaks to this idea that arriving at the destination is not the sole objective. As Rav Soloveitchik notes, our task is not simply knowing a place. “One must not wait for the prophet to reveal the location; seek and find the place, and the prophet will indicate whether your choice is correct.  God insists that they search for this future location by honing a sixth sense to intuit the holiness of place.”

God’s desire is that we hone our sense of holiness. Doing so demands attention to the journey itself. For there are no easily-read maps or bright road markers along the way. We need to be able to *sense* what is holy, so we can distinguish it from the profane. Developing an instinct for holiness has never been easy but it is so much more challenging now, at a time when it seems *everything* around us is fake – fake news, fake video, fake piety.

Rav Soloveitchik reminds us that at Shabbat’s conclusion, we bless God who has separated between *the holy and profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the days of creation.* Hmm. So much of this is straightforward. Distinguishing between light and darkness is a simple matter.  Between the seventh day and the days of creation? One needs nothing more than a wall calendar. Israel and the nations? We are reminded of the distinction in every newspaper, every day. But to be *mavdil*, to distinguish between holy and profane, between *kodesh* and *chol*? That is not simple at all. It requires a spiritual intuition; the ability to see with the heart, not just with the eye. It relies on the soul, not sophisticated navigational instruments.  That deeply-rooted sense needs ever greater homing in our times when the lines between holy and profane are ever so much more blurred.

Ramban references Kabbalah to understand *shamah*. “And according to the way of truth [i.e., Kabbalah] ‘you shall seek out His presence and come there’ to see the face of the Master, the Lord, God of Israel. And from here [the word *l’shichno*]the Rabbis derived [the term] *Shechinah.*” Ramban is teaching us that man must always be in search of God because God reveals Himself everywhere and always. He is forever to be found in the universe. His *Shechina* is always *shochen*, it is always dwelling somewhere in this world, *His* world. We need to look and look again until we find Him.  Rav Soloveitchik stresses that *l’shichno tidreshu* means, “…search for His abiding, for His being present, search for His presence right here and now. Search for God and you will find Him.   Even when you feel assured that He is indeed present in every experience, don’t stop, keep going. Where? *U’vaata shamah* – further.  Where is this *shamah*?  Further, always further, than your destination, ‘…to see the face of the Master, the Lord, God of Israel’; to see the God Who revealed Himself to Israel at Sinai. And God descended on Mount Sinai (Shemot 19:20) from beyond, from outside the world, from His transcendental abode.”

Could such a search *ever* cease? Could it be possible to ever claim that there we are done seeking?

We ultimately know and understand that *HaMakom asher yivchar* –the place that Hashem will choose – is Mount Moriah. Why? Because Avraham Avinu searched and sought and persisted in his search until he was able to intuit the holiness of the place that would remain so forever.  It is this place that is worthy of his ultimate statement of faith – the Akedah, the climax of a lifetime of seeking and searching.  It is this place that God expects and anticipates we too will be able to intuit as “the place that He will choose”.

The Midrash tells us that Avraham and Yitzchak both perceived the Godliness of Moriah, while Eliezer and Ishmael did not. How do we know? He instructed them to, “Stay here with the donkey.” He is telling them, just as the donkey failed to perceive the holiness here, you too do not possess the spiritual sensitivity needed to sense the location of the Beit Hamikdash.

In these insights, we understand that a Jew must never stop being a “seeker”, a *mevakesh*. He must never stop looking until every crevice of holiness has been explored and experienced; until every aspect of God has been realized and, as such a moment could never be, he can never stop.

Ultimately, the Beit Hamikdash location rested with the final authority of the prophet. Even David who had invested inordinate efforts to identify the Temple deferred to the prophet Gad to confirm the exact spot.  So, we, coming to Jerusalem with an already built Temple, keep seeking, keep asking, keep basking in God’s glory. We keep asking, “Where is it”? We dare not ever be satisfied or think our search is over. We continue, for ourselves and for others. Our excitement must draw others in, convince *them* to ask, “Where is it? How do I get there?” We must understand that these questions are never simply about the Temple’s location but about the deeper quest, “Where is there greater spirituality? Where can I find God?” We must show that an inspiring environment, a good *chevra*, the joy of the journey are all aspects of spirituality. We must be tireless for the task is never complete. Without the spiritual thirst to seek, spiritual life becomes stale. It becomes formalized. It becomes fossilized.

How many of us have become such fossils? We drag ourselves back to shul, to yeshiva, to a *shiur*. We are on autopilot, glad to have our “spiritual Waze” show the way; trusting the algorithm rather than our spiritual instinct.

We have stopped seeking. What then is the point in going *shamah*? There is no *shamah* without *tidreshu.*

Going *shamah*. The renowned *ba’al mussar*, the Alter of Novardok viewed this as the foundation of his pedagogical approach. He refused to force each *talmid* into some cookie-cutter mold. He wanted for each student to develop to be the very best *they* could be, each with their own God given abilities and strengths.  He desired only one thing for each one of his students – the constant desire to be a seeker of truth and to thereby strive to grow in all aspects of *avodas Hashem*, service to God.

It is told that when Rav Chaim Shmulevitz visited Novardok he asked the Alter which *talmid* in the yeshiva was his best. The Alter responded that one student was the most intelligent, one the most studious, one possessed the most all-encompassing knowledge, but the greatest student was one student sitting in the corner of the *beis midrash*.  R’ Chaim turned to the Alter and asked, “If he is not the brightest, the most studious, the most knowledgeable, what then makes him the best?” The Alter smiled. “He is the biggest seeker.”

That student, by the way, grew up to be the great Steipler Gaon!

The Chasam Sofer sees in our posuk a general directive for true *avodas HaShem*.  If one never stops seeking Hashem, if seeking is a lifelong goal, he can be assured that *u’vaata shamah*, he will come there.