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I come to you tonight directly from a funeral. Today, I buried my beloved friend, Joe Septimus. Joe is about 20 years older than me.

We met about that 20 years ago. And somehow, almost immediately, we recognized each other. We felt like soul brothers to one another.

Joe also was someone who was well-versed in the modern Orthodox world that I had been brought up in, but also had spent time in the ultra-Orthodox world that I also spent time in. And we had both gone to Yeshivat Chaim Berlin at the same time. Like a Yankee doodle, you know, when a Connecticut Yankee and King Arthur's Court, we were like Chaim Berliners on the Upper West Side.

And even though, externally, we looked like we were the closer children of the Upper West Side Jewish establishment, in our hearts, we were still somewhere in Yeshiva, in Chaim Berlin. Joe was a person of incredible integrity and curiosity. The things that mattered to him the most were family.

And then, very closely after that, Torah and learning Torah. He was one of the founders of the Limud Conference that happened here in New York. His son, Daniel, became the founder of something called Sefaria, which is an online portal to learning Torah and making Torah and the study of Torah accessible to thousands upon thousands of people.

Joe Septimus put Torah and spiritual growth and the life of the soul above everything. And from the beginning, he saw me. I have a few people in my life, mostly those who are very, very close to me, who naturally began to call me by, I guess, the endearing term, not David or Dovid, but Dovi.

And to Joe, from the beginning, I was Dov. Not Rabbi, not David, but just Dov. He told me how much he loved me almost every time we talked, and we talked at one point very frequently, and I told him back that I loved him.

We had an annual pilgrimage together, every Sukkot in the intermediate days of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, the Great Hosanna. The Karabach Shul on 79th Street is known for really having a great Hoshana Rabbah. And every year after the Chagim, after the holidays, and their intensity would abate, I would wait to meet Joe at a rendezvous at Karabach.

There were years where we didn't meet. Mostly during years when family obligations and other things were too onerous. But he would always mention to me that he missed me.

And he would sit there with me for the whole year like I missed Hoshana Rabbah with Joe. Why was it so special to dine with Joe Septimus and Hoshana Rabbah? Joe was a crier. All you

needed was like one nigun, one melody, one note, and he began to bawl.

Someone who could learn Torah and intellectually wrestle as a side gig. The minute you put him in front of God and became a seeker, his heart would open. And we would stand together in Karabach with our prayer shawls above our heads, shoulder to shoulder as he cried and I did too.

So I'm coming in to Shemart, carrying Joe with me, and also carrying a teaching from this week's Parsha that, because of Joe, I'm hearing it differently this week. The Parsha this week, Ki Tetzei, contains more mitzvot, more commandments than any other Parsha in the entire Torah. Seventy-four mitzvot.

Seventy-four. It's almost dizzying. And among them, there is a mitzvah that at first glance seems almost mundane.

A mundane mitzvah. If you see your fellow, your citizen, your fellow citizen, if you see his ox or his sheep that is wandering lost, lost sheep or lost ox, you may not ignore it. You have to return it to its owner.

And the Torah keeps going. If the owner isn't nearby, bring the animal home with you. Keep it until the owner comes looking for it.

You came across the animal, so take responsibility. And not only that for ox and for sheep, but guess what? I know this is going to surprise you, also for donkeys. And let's add, not just donkeys, but garments, clothing.

The Torah, after telling us ox and sheep and donkey and garments, then says, you know what? Let's make a general category. Anything that gets lost that belongs to your brother or your sister, you have to do what's called known as Hashavat Avedah. You have to return a lost object.

But what's catching my attention, and Joe, thank you, this year, is not really, it's not actually the command to return the object. It's the Torah's description of what happens immediately before it commands us to return the object. The Torah describes that you see something that's lost.

You're walking along, it's Madison Avenue, you see something's lost. And the Torah then says, you could hide yourself from it. L'hit alei means to hide.

We were just singing that, right? These are the things my heart yearns for. We were just singing a beautiful song from Rabbi Debussex Mintz, right? And L'hit alei means to hide it, to hide it from yourself. You make yourself not see it.

Does that make sense? You saw it. Otherwise the Torah wouldn't have said that you stumbled upon it. It was a nice tailored guitar, it was right there in the middle of the street.

But what are you thinking? You're looking at your watch. I'm meeting my friend to go golfing. I've

got a lunch appointment.

But I saw it. Can I not see what I saw? Lo tuchal l'hit alein. The Torah says, you may not, you can't.

Lo tuchal means you don't have the capacity. You may not hide yourself. It's such a strange formulation.

The Torah could have said, if you find something, return it. But instead the Torah seems fascinated by this teeny moral moment before the action. I see something, I know something is wrong, I know something has been lost.

And then comes this extraordinary human impulse to keep walking. Someone else will take care of it. I'm busy, it's complicated.

I don't really know what to say. I'll call in tomorrow, I'll visit next week. It's not mine.

Lo tuchal l'hit alein. You're not permitted to disappear. Which means that returning an object that is lost does not actually begin with returning the object.

What is prior to the commitment to return the object is, you have to see it and not not see it. You have to see it and then consciously refuse to not see what you've seen. It's a refusal to look away.

And that language feels especially, especially poignant and charged and relevant. With three weeks left until Rosh Hashanah. That language of not being able to look away.

Seeing something and not burying it again under the mind's carpet. Or in the back closet somewhere. I'll clean it later.

Just parenthetically, I was at my mother's house yesterday with one of the kids. And my mother, she has archives of old photos and stuff like that, that she still keeps. So she said, do you want these photos? So we make our way into her room and in the back of her closet, under four or five bags, we have to go in there and take out bags.

And then under there, there's a stash, a big garbage bag of children's photos. We lugged it. Bear and I lugged it like it was Santa Claus with this big, you know.

The Torah's language here sounds like an echo of the very first question that God asked us. Right? We know the story. Adam and Eve eat from this tree.

We don't know what kind of fruit it is. And they hear God approaching. I heard your voice.

And Adam does what human beings have been doing ever since we know this one. Adam hides. He hides.

And God has to actually call out Ayeka. We know God knows where Adam is. The Torah is not giving us information because God was confused.

God's question is not, I don't know where you are. God's saying, you're lost. And I'm looking for you.

Do you know you're lost? Are you hiding? And that's where tshuva begins. Where tshuva, repentance, begins is not, did I fix everything? It isn't even, did you return the thing that you found? Before any of that comes a simpler, more basic question that is operative at every level of our operating systems. Ayeka, where am I? Are you home? Are you here? Are you willing to come out of hiding? Can you make yourself discoverable? You know that? We have that with our Bluetooth.

Right? It's like you're trying to connect it to the, it's like you have to turn it on, right? If it's not discoverable, you won't get the signal. If you're not open to receiving a message, it'll just keep landing somewhere and not in you. It just lands somewhere.

The Baal Shem Tov used to say that, it says in the Torah that there's a voice that goes out every day and says, where are the people who are learning Torah, where are the people who are returning? And the Baal Shem Tov said, if it goes out every day, how come nobody hears it? It's a daily herald? I haven't heard it. And the Baal Shem Tov answered, he said, of course it's going out every day, but only some hear it. Because they've made themselves discoverable.

They're not hiding. Or if they're hiding, they at least know that they're hiding. Say, I'm hiding.

I want you to see me. I want you to find me. Are you willing to see what actually is in front of you? That's the first moment the Torah says, Before you return the object, first see it.

And willfully, powerfully, courageously. Not let yourself unsee it. So we got that part so far, yeah? You with me? Let's go one more step, okay? The Talmud is going to take this seemingly simple mitzvah.

And they're going to do something extraordinarily incredible with it. The rabbis in the Gemara and the Talmud say, What exactly can be an Avedah? What is the category of lost things? How expansive is that? Is it lost objects only? What can become lost? On the biblical level we heard. What is it? An ox? A sheep? A donkey? A garment? A shmanta? Property? But the rabbis in the Talmud say something even more amazing.

They say, you know, Where do we know that when another human being is in mortal danger, drowning, or attacked by an animal, or threatened with death, that we are obligated to intervene? The rabbis understand the Torah to require us to restore what another person is in danger of losing. And suddenly, HaShavas Avedah is no longer only about property, because a human being can become an Avedah too. A human being can also become something that is lost, says

the Talmud.

A life can be slipping away. A person can become so lost. And once I see that that person is lost, Torah makes a claim on me.

Now that is a radical idea. It's a radical idea. Your loss is no longer entirely your problem alone.

Think about that. A society that sees people who feel lost or lonely, and says, I can't ignore, I saw it. You're wandering.

You don't know how to get home. Financially, economically, spiritually, as a civic responsibility and obligation, the threads of what connects us. And if I see it, something has now been asked of me.

And not because I am there to fix you. That's so arrogant. I'm not.

And it isn't because I can do the work for you either. You have to do tshuva too. It's not because I can restore everything that life has taken from you.

But Judaism, Yiddish scribe, refuses the fantasy that your lostness has nothing to do with me. We refuse that. Lotucha lit alein.

You can't unsee that. You can't ignore that. I cannot hide myself from you.

And turn the other way. I was having a conversation with somebody yesterday, and they began the conversation by saying, it's horrible what the city is doing. They're going to be putting a homeless shelter here, a couple of blocks away from us.

There goes the neighborhood. Big question. Far be it from me.

Complicated. How we zone, all those things. But in a loving, beloved community, in a society that takes care of one another, that sees other people's trials and tribulations and vicissitudes and exigencies as part of what is the fabric of are we, the people, a little bit more lotucha lit alein.

I can't not see you. And your needs and your humanity. And maybe that is the definition of a sacred community.

Maybe that is the definition of a sacred community. A community is a group of people who help return one another to one another. A sacred community is engaged in the obligation to return a lost object.

And the lost object is every member of the community. Yeah? Lotucha lit alein. Lotucha lit alein.

And by the way, just wait for a second. I know it's Friday night, and I haven't slept in two days, because I'm a little bit wired, but listen to me. Lotucha.

Lotucha. What do you mean lotucha? Do you know what the Hebrew lotucha means? You can't. What do you mean I can't? Of course I can.

You can't? Really? You know where that appears in the Torah? That phrase lotucha in the wrestling match between Jacob and the angel? Vayar ki lo yachol lo. The angel saw that he could not prevail over Jacob. And Jacob fighting with the angel.

Wrestling with him to know his true name. And the angel saw lo yachol, I can't. I can't win.

Your desire for a new name, your desire for truth, your desire to see the truth is too powerful. Lotucha lit alein. Same verb, you can't not see.

You have to see it. Your desire to see the truth has to overcome all other impulses to turn away. And sometimes that will mean saving a life, and sometimes it will mean that when somebody stops showing up, and somebody notices, and somebody is sitting alone, and somebody sees it, and somebody moves towards them, or someone is sick, and somebody calls, or there's a Shiva, and Nili will be there.

We show up. There's a minion. We show up.

Someone we love has begun disappearing into themselves, and we call them. We knock on the door, and we say, where are you, Ayeka? I haven't seen you. I miss you.

And there you are. And sometimes what is in danger of being lost belongs not only to one person, but to a whole community. Last Friday, when Central Synagogue in New York was targeted, a group of rabbis, and I was privileged to be among them, came together to say something very, very simple, that we stand with Central.

And I have come this week to understand that that small act was an act of our Shabbat HaVedah, because we can lose sight of what is most important in our society. We can lose sight of how important safety is. Trust can be lost, just like a sheep.

The sense that Jews can gather openly and without fear can be lost. And something larger can be lost, too. The remarkable and fragile promise of this country that people of different faiths can build lives alongside one another and can stand up for one another when one of us is threatened, that can also be eroded.

Those things don't generally disappear all at once. They slip away. And when we notice something precious beginning to slip away, the Torah tells us, Don't let it slip away.

Don't look away. Show up for one another. Help guard what is precious.

Help return what is being lost. And today, I heard that. Also, in a more personal way, because of losing Joe.

Joe and I had not actually lived in the same community for a long time. And we were living in the same building at one point, but then we moved out. And life moved on, and time passed, and I saw him.

We spoke frequently. But somehow, Joe dropped out of my daily field of vision. And Joe became sick.

And I found out late. I don't know how I didn't know. I'm not so great with social media, and I'm not part of the community that he belongs to, and I just didn't know.

And when I found out, I didn't respond with the kind of alacrity that I wish I had. But I did. I reached out.

I called him. I found him in the hospital, where he had been for almost six months. And Joe, characteristically, generously, the warm-hearted human that he was, he received me with love.

Dove, I'm so happy to hear you. Don't worry. When I get out of here, we'll go for a walk.

How are the kids? How's Ariel? Tell me about the boys. How's Rumumu? How's the wand? I really want to learn something with you. I have this thing in mind.

We're going to go to Oshanaraba this year together. It's coming up. And Joe went home from the hospital, and I promised I would come to see him.

And I had a voice message from him that I kept staring at every week, thinking this is the week I'm going to call him. But then I had to go. Summer came, and busy.

But Joe's okay. He's home. And I didn't even know that he had returned to the hospital until yesterday.

At the end of evening prayers, I got a text from someone saying, Joe Septimus passed away. And it hit me like someone punched me in the stomach. I didn't immediately believe it, though.

Because about four years ago, some really strange occurrence happened where there's another person named Joe Septimus that my family knows, and I got an email telling me that Joe Septimus had passed away four years ago. There's an email that came through, and I hadn't spoken to Joe, and I thought, I can't believe it. I can't believe Joe passed away.

No way. And I started calling him, and he didn't pick up. I called his wife.

She didn't pick up. And it went like that for two hours until finally I picked up the phone, and I heard his voice, and I started to bawl. And I immediately said to him, Ha'od Yosef Chai, the words from the story of Jacob.

When Jacob hears that his son Joseph is alive, and I said to him, his name is Eliezer Yosef, I

said, Ha'od Yosef Chai, you're still alive. He said, I'm still here. And so when I got the text yesterday, it hit me so hard, and I thought, no, maybe it's a mistake.

Somebody would have called me. I would have known. But it immediately became very clear that Joe was gone, and there's a particular pain and a grief when something can't be returned, no matter how hard you try.

There are some, Avedon, there are some lost things that can't be brought back. There are some things that, no matter how much you show up for it, you can't bring it back. And so today, I stood at the cemetery, and I buried my friend, and I thought about the kinds of things that can't be returned, the calls I can't make now, the visit I can't make, the words I can't say.

And I don't want the Torah to rescue me from that truth. Sometimes an Aveda really is an Aveda, and it hurts, and we live with it. And as we enter more deeply into Tshuva, into doing this kind of soul-searching, it doesn't mean pretending that we can travel backwards through time and make a different choice.

We can't do that. But the Torah can still ask of me and all of us here, what can you see now? Who is still here? Who have you been meaning to call? Whose absence have you noticed? Who has drifted toward the edge of your field of vision? Where have you said, I'm going to get to it? Where are you tempted to hide? Lo tuhalit alein will appear in all of those places. There is still time to call that person.

There is still time to show up. There is still love that can be returned, and so don't hide. And so here's a question for you, friends, as we close.

What if, and just go with me here for a second, okay? So all of that was on the human level, right? You got all that, right? That was all about us in community, with our friends, our lovers. But what if for a moment you thought that the one, the presence, the one, God, thinks about us the way that I'm telling myself and all of us that we should be thinking about each other. What if I said, as I said earlier, we are the Avedah.

We are the lost objects. We are the lost objects, and we turn to Hashem, and we say, God, we're the sheep on your highway. We're the garment that's lying beside the road.

We're the ones who are confused. We're the ones longing for partnership. We're the ones longing for sanity.

We're the ones longing for connection. We're the ones longing for meaning and purpose. We're the ones wanting to know you.

We're the ones wanting to feel your gaze, to feel your caress, to know your presence, and to feel meaning and purpose. We're the ones. We're the Avedah.

And then I hear God, as I said earlier, saying ayeka differently. God isn't interrogating us, saying, where are you? Where are you? God's saying, where are you? I'm looking for you. I know you're lost.

I want to help find you. I want to help you find yourself. That's our mantra.

Hashiveinu, bring us back. And then nashuvah, we'll come back together. Help us make the days going forward as new as we wanted to make the days behind us.

Only you can do that. Hashiveinu, adonai lecha v'nashuvah. Chadash ameinu ki kedem.

God help us to bring all lost objects back to where they belong.