



Parshat Korach
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Torah in the Airport Terminal
by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Last Shabbos, I was away travelling. After a sweet weekend on the West Coast, I came back to Colorado exhausted and was running late as I raced to the airport for the final leg of my journey back to Boston.

I was practically running, my shoes half on, and juggling baggies of 3 oz. liquids and food in the security line as I tried to shove them back into my carry on. Just then I saw the departure screen and stopped dead in my tracks.

Flight 15 to Boston delayed 5 hours.

I call customer service. After an hour of elevator music, someone answers and tells me there is nothing she can do. My best option is just to wait.

So I walk to the nearest charging station. I figure I'll plug in my phone and computer. That way at least my batteries will be charged.

Time passes. I'm reading on my computer, tuning out the world, when a man sits down next to me and leans over the cubicle barrier with a smile.

“You waiting for your flight?”

I sigh. “For the next five hours. Ugh.” I start telling him about the whole day, the rush, the wait, the frustration. He listens, and then with a kind smile says, “you know, you don't have

to be like that. So you wait here for a while. You're still gonna travel. You still have all your hair. Now you get to decide what to do."

It's as if an angel has come to tell me exactly what I needed to hear. He's totally right. "Thanks for the pep talk," I say and turn back to my computer.

But the man is still leaning over the cubicle wall, still talking.

"So," he says, "do you believe in God?"

I look up. Is he going to try to convert me? Should I answer? Do you lose rabbi points by avoiding God conversations in the airport?

"Yes, I believe in God," I reply with some reticence.

He looks at me dubiously. "But do you believe in our Lord and Savior?"

"No," I say bracing myself, "I'm Jewish."

He jumps up. "You're Jewish? Oh, I'm so glad to meet you!" He sticks out his hand and starts shaking mine vigorously and continuously. "I've only ever met one Jewish person before and we had the best conversation. Oh, I'm so glad to meet you!"

Turns out, the cheery man's name is Andinet. He's from Ethiopia and spends his days wheeling chair-bound travelers through the airport. When he can, he likes to arrive at the gate early. He parks the wheelchair and finds someone to talk with. A good conversation makes his day.

We had a great conversation. We talked and talked and talked until they announced that the plane Andinet was waiting for had arrived. He jumped up with a start and then sat right back

down. “Wait,” he said, “I have to go but we didn’t talk about after death. What do you think happens? Do you go to heaven? Do you believe in hell?”

I started with my classic rabbinic, “well there are lots of answers…” but Andinet interrupted me. “That’s no good—what do you think?! Tell me—Oh I have to go!” He raced off to fetch his passenger, pushing his wheelchair and shaking his head.

I turned back to my computer, but I couldn’t focus. I kept thinking back to Andinet; to our conversation. The more I thought about it, the more I began to wonder why that interaction had affected me so deeply. It wasn’t a love story—no sparks had flown. It wasn’t the answer to some burning question—we hadn’t spoken about anything even remotely revelatory. Our conversation changed nothing in the world. So why did it feel so important?

Maybe the conversation felt important because it was surprising. I love talking with strangers, but people aren’t usually very chatty in the airport. Usually you get a few pleasantries, maybe a short quip. People rarely approach you seeking conversation.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that this interaction was more than a surprise. It had woken me up. Here I was, at the airport, surrounded by people, but totally oblivious to their presence. I was sitting by myself in a little charging cubby, closed off to the world, tuned into my screen.

And I realized that I’m guilty of this more often than I’d like to acknowledge. We all are.

You know that moment when you’re rushing to an important meeting and walk by a dear friend, but you’re in such a hurry you don’t even see them?

When you're sitting at the dinner table, frantically typing away on your phone, trying to respond to an important email message, and realize that your partner just said something and you've missed it?

All too often, we move through the world like race horses with our blinders on. We're rushing, we're focused, we're productive, but we're missing out.

Baruch Hashem, the Torah has something to teach us about these moments. Our ancestors had the ultimate delayed flight. They left Egypt, thinking they were boarding a direct route to Israel and the Promised Land, and got stuck in the desert. 40 years delayed. Can you imagine?

After more than 400 years of wearing blinders to everything but their next obligation, they were stuck waiting. And they didn't even have a departure screen to mark the time.

But their time in the desert was not a waste. In fact, that seemingly empty time was arguably the most generative and impactful period in our people's history. It was the empty expanse of the terminal which helped our ancestors to tune into the world around them. It was the silence of the desert that helped them to hear the Torah. It was the monotony of waiting that helped them to see the Divine spark in one another; to see themselves as a people rather than a collection of individuals stuck in the same place.

The same can be true for us. And it can happen anywhere, even in an airport. (Like me), author Naomi Nye was wandering around the airport. Her flight had been delayed and she was looking to pass the time.

Over the loudspeakers she heard a strange announcement. *If anyone near Gate A-4 understands Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.* A-4 happened to be Naomi's gate, and she spoke Arabic. She headed that way.

When she arrived, she saw an older woman crying on the floor. The gate attendants told her that the woman started crying when they told her that her flight was delayed. "Can you talk to her?" they asked.

Naomi leaned down and started speaking with the woman. She told her that the flight was delayed. It wasn't cancelled. She learned that the woman had an important medical appointment the next day and was terrified she would miss her treatment.

The woman was still crying softly, and so Naomi asked her about her family. They called her son and Naomi promised him she would stay with the woman until the flight arrived. Then they called all of her other sons to chat. When they ran out of children, Naomi called her own father and they chatted for a while and learned that they had friends in common. Then, she started calling her friends. By then the woman was laughing and smiling. All the tears were gone.

The older woman pulled out a bag of cookies and started handing them around to everyone at the gate. Now everyone was laughing and smiling and sharing stories. In her book, *Honeybee*, Naomi writes, "I looked around and I thought, this is the world I want to live in...this can still happen anywhere...not everything is lost."

Life is full of desert way-stations; full of lonely mountains waiting to become Sinai. When we find ourselves delayed, sitting in traffic, waiting in line, stranded in the desert—in

those moments we get to choose. Will we leave our blinders on? Or will we reach out to the people who surround us and together find the Torah that lies in wait?