



Deer in the Condo
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by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

It was early in the morning. I had just sat down at my kitchen table with a cup of coffee, when I happened to look out the window and caught my breath. A deer stood there, ears erect, eyes darting around. I watched as it took one more look and then lowered its head to nibble at foliage on the ground.

Usually in the mornings I read the paper on my phone. But that morning, I couldn't take my eyes off the deer. It reminded me of so many sweet memories. When I was little, we lived in Evergreen, Colorado, in a house that was literally built into the side of a mountain. I used to watch deer and elk through my bedroom window as they grazed around my swing set and ran up and down the mountainside. There it made sense. There were plenty of wild spaces for them to roam; we were the ones encroaching on their space. But here?

I live in a condo in Boston, built along a busy street by VFW Parkway. I wake up to the sounds of neighbors shushing their dogs and starting their cars. My kitchen looks out on condos up on the ridge, condos on the sides, condos below, and on a scrap of woods maybe 40 feet by 60 feet long in between. It's woods because my neighbors don't mow there around the rock and the trees, but it's hardly big enough to deserve such a name, surrounded by buildings, cars, streets, and people.

Where did that deer come from? How does it spend its days? Is it always wandering between scraps of forest, pockets of grass and trees? Does it miss just running through the woods, without having to dodge cars and hide from people? Where does it go during the day?

And as I pondered the deer's predicament, I began to see the ways in which we are all like that deer. Our lives are hemmed in on all sides with work and obligations. So many of us wake up extra early to nibble at that patch of grass—the 5 minute meditation app, the chance to drink a cup of coffee sitting down, to read the paper—and then we're off, darting from task to task until late at night. Like the deer, we can never stay in one place too long. We're constantly on the look out for risks, weathering anxieties to the extent that we can never fully immerse ourselves in any one moment. We travel in herds, and yet we feel existentially alone because we so rarely encounter the space and nutrients that we need at our core.

This is something I see every day with our teens. As you may know, I meet with every teen after they celebrate becoming a b-mitzvah ostensibly to talk about next steps. "Mazal tov" I say, "you were amazing—how did it feel? What was your favorite part? This is only the beginning!" Then, I suggest a round of "All the things you never knew you desperately want to do at Temple Emanuel." The game goes like this—I read out a list of 22 possible teen activities and the teens rank each activity between 0 (0 interest) and 10 (can I start yesterday) or ask me what it is, and then I'm delighted to share.

Occasionally, the teen sitting across from me shows signs of interest—they ask about programs, respond "that sounds cool—when can I start?" But more often, the experience goes something like this: Rosh Hodesh—0, Go to a USY event—2, Come to a Teen Salon—1, Telem Service Learning—1, read Torah—0,..." I used to finish these meetings and sit dejected in my office. How can we inspire the next generation of Jews to participate actively in Jewish community when they literally have 0 interest? What's the point?

And then, I noticed a trend. I started asking teens about their schedules first, about their activities, their passions. I found that the teens who are most scheduled, who move from dance

to soccer to math tutoring to rehearsal—those are the teens that most often sit on my couch with a look of disinterest throwing out 0s, 1s, and 2s. I would feel the same if I was in their shoes. Here they are, with every minute of their day scheduled and programmed, with no time to themselves or to just hang out with friends, and their annoying rabbi has the perfect program they can add to their busy to-do list. It's no wonder that these meetings are minimally successful. For these teens in my office, free time is a scrap of woods in a condo association and I'm the developer with plans to tear it all down.

But there's a catch. When I meet with these teens, I'm offering an array of programs which are designed to get at something deeper. Judaism is like a map of green spaces. Tucked throughout the city, there are parks and lakes and open wooded areas. They are waiting for you, but you have to know how to get there. When you're in the bustle of the city, it's easy to forget. But living in Jewish time, celebrating Shabbat and holidays, connecting with God at mealtimes—those moments are a guide for us, steering us towards experiences which will nourish our souls and fortify us to stand down our to-do lists.

A few months ago, I had a teen in my office. He's in high school now, preparing himself for college. And, like every other teen I know, he is super stressed. He starts telling me that he made this interesting discovery. He explained that he always used to wonder why he felt so different at camp. There, he's happy and calm. Here, he feels stressed even when he's finished everything he has to do. He started to think about what happens at camp, about what's different. He realized that the moment he feels most calm is the moment right after tefilla. So, he decided to conduct an experiment. He began waking up a few minutes early to do some davenning. That's when he noticed the magic. He said, "Aliza, it's not as though I've changed anything in

my life. I'm doing all the same things. I still have the same amount of homework. But somehow, everything just feels better.”

That's what we want for our children. Honestly, that's what we want for ourselves. It's easy to feel crushed under the burden of obligations and commitments. It's easy to think that if we optimize our time, if we just do more, then we will be successful. But the truth is that more is not better, more is just more. Our goal, as Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan once taught me, is to be a human being, not a human doing.

This is the lesson in our Torah. Once upon a time, our ancestors lived under the harsh rule of Pharaoh, servants to cruel taskmasters in Egypt. Their days were harried to-do lists, rushed from task to task, and their time was not their own. They cried out to God. They were stressed and anxious. They couldn't breathe. God didn't come down and give them meditation apps or spiritual rituals to observe in Egypt. God didn't give them Torah. Instead, God brought them out with an outstretched arm. It was only when they reached the open spaces of desert, when they encountered a moment without an agenda, that God knew they could receive a revelation of wisdom.

Let's not fool ourselves. We are no different than our ancestors. It's not as though we are better at multi-tasking, nor as if our to-do lists bring us revelatory bliss. We've just become inured to the tedium of obligation, numb to the loss of expansive forests and time.

It's time for us to claim our Torah.

It's time for us to focus on being, and not just doing. Instead of scheduling every waking minute with programs and activities, it's time for us to set aside time to ponder, to wander through green spaces, to day dream.

It's time for us to see value in who we are and not just in what we've accomplished. Let's measure success in friendships, belly laughs, life-lessons learned. Let's tell our children that they are blessings in the world, no matter what grades they get in school or how many extracurricular activities they have on their calendar.

We can do this. The time is now.