Drasha/Sermon Parshas Shemos "Feel the Pebbles

Everyone knows the feeling; rushing to the gate to catch a plane. But there was a pilot who did something almost unheard of -- for a good reason. It was one of the most important flights of their lives ...and the Short family was about to miss it; A few weeks ago the Shorts were traveling on Delta Airlines from Phoenix to Minneapolis. But their plane was ninety minutes late, and their time to catch their connection to Memphis ran out. They arrived at the gate just as the plane pushed back and began to taxi down the runway -- without them.

Rick Short said, "The lady got on the phone with the tower and said there wasn't anything they could do. My mom and sister were sitting there in tears. I'm sitting there screaming through the glass." That's when the captain saw the family, radioed in, and said he was coming back to get the Short family. Why? Because he heard on the radio that for the Short family, missing their flight meant missing their husband and father's funeral.

Jay Short, 56 year-old father of 3, died after a 5 month battle with lung cancer. Marcia Short’s husband of 32 years wished to be buried by his family in Tennessee. Marcia's daughter Nicole said, “The heartache and thought of missing that flight hurt tremendously. When the phone rang at the desk and she said it was the pilot who insisted on bringing that plane back to the gate to let us on more tears came. But these ones were happy tears.”

A Delta spokesperson identified the pilot, who made the extraordinarily rare decision to come back, as Captain Adam Cohen.

Adam Cohen's uncommon act of common decency brings to mind an enduring lesson in this week's Torah portion.

Moses, our greatest leader, encountered a burning bush. He paused to marvel at the sight of a bush on fire, with the blaze roaring through it but not consuming it. He wondered why the bush wasn’t swallowed up by the flames. As he stood at the site trying to understand what was going on, Hashem told him to remove his shoes. The Almighty soon introduced Himself to Moses, and told him that he was the one to lead the Jewish people out of Egyptian slavery.

Why did Hashem tell Moses to take off his shoes?

Imagine yourself walking on a gentle path on a hill beside the sea. It’s a glorious sunny day, warm but with a slight cooling breeze, puffy white clouds drifting across the bluest of blue skies. Your destination is a seaside cafe where a dear friend awaits. Perfection.

And then…

You get a pebble in your shoe. All of your focus immediately shifts to the pain in the ball of your foot and the need to not have it hurt. You might try to ignore it and hobble along, hoping it will shift or somehow just disappear. After all, it’s a bother to stop and take off your shoe to deal with it, and your friend is waiting. There’s no time to deal with this, and it’s so annoying to have a pebble ruin a perfectly good walk.

Of course, the pebble doesn’t go away but just gets lodged more firmly. Unicorns and rainbows might suddenly appear for all you know, but you won’t notice because you’re so distracted. You limp along, getting more frustrated until you just do what needs to be done. Take off the shoe, remove the offending pebble, and walk on.

Most of us can identify many “pebbles” in our daily lives. It’s funny how these small things can have a bigger effect on us than we even realize.

But sometimes, a pebble in your shoe can be a good thing.

Did you ever hear the expression, "If you want to forget about your troubles, put a pebble in your shoe"?

There are two types of pebbles, then. One is the daily irritations that wear us down and prevent us from climbing the mountain. The other type of pebbles are the 'underfoot pebbles'; those serve a positive function in showing us what we should pay attention to.

Hashem asked Moses to remove his shoes to teach Moses to experience the pain caused by the small stones under his feet. A leader must empathize with people even when their problems appear to be insignificant.

In removing his shoes, Moses was being told to show respect for the holiness of the place. What established the holiness of the site? The burning bush metaphorically represented a person in pain, flames licking at him and singeing him, but unable to consume him. This, of course, was what Moses' brethren were experiencing in

There are people who appear to be leading perfectly happy lives, but who are broken inside. Many times, this feeling is brought on by loneliness. So many people in our world are lonely. In fact, there appears to be an epidemic of lonely people. Nobody wears a sign that says, “I am lonely. Be nice to me.” But if you look in the eyes of lonely people, you perceive sadness, emptiness and loneliness.

In times not long ago, loneliness was rare. Perhaps you remember a time growing up when your grandparents lived with you, aunts and uncles in the same apartment building, and many relatives on the same block. At times the close proximity of so many relatives could feel a bit suffocating -- but no one who lived in such a close community felt alone. Today, many people are scattered to the four directions of the country and beyond. We're awash in technology and materialism but isolated from people.

A rabbi told of the time he accompanied a prominent Rebbe to the home of an individual who was going through a difficult period. The man being visited asked the Rebbe for something that might help spare him from further pain. The Rebbe responded that there are support groups today for everything and organizations to help with seemingly every communal problem, but there is one group of people who appear to be totally neglected - people who are tzubrochen -- broken. “There are so many tzubrochene neshamos,” the Rebbe said. “When you have free time, call up a tzubrochene person.”

A Jew must appreciate the pain of another and know how to “remove his shoes”, feel the pebbles, and stand back, silently and respectfully. Don’t judge someone who is suffering. As far as you are concerned, he is a holy person. Love him, daven for him, and encourage him with sensitivity. Remove your shoes and feel the pain and pebbles, the sticks and stones. Judging is for Hashem; our job is to empathize.

Last week, a Rabbi from Aish Hatorah lost his life in a terror attack while walking along the walls of Jerusalem's Old City. Someone remarked that he was heartbroken when he saw that the family resorted to advertising for people to help with the minyan as they sat shivah. While we give individuals the benefit of the doubt to assume they had a valid reason not to attend (distance, security concerns, etc.), at the same time we would like to think that many others would be running to support a family who lost their father and husband in such a gruesome fashion.

When we hear of a tzarah (difficulty) in the community, we must feel the pebbles. Feel the pain as if it was ours. Feeling sad is not enough. We have to daven and say Tehillim for the people who are suffering. We have to seek ways to help them, even if it is difficult and even if it is time-consuming. That is the secret of our strength. That is what keeps us, the Jewish people, going.

There shouldn’t be such a thing as a personal tzarah. The distress of every person should be felt by the community.

Our forefathers -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David -- were shepherds. Why? Because to excel as a shepherd, you have to feel the pain of an animal and understand how to care for it and motivate it. The sensitivity, concern and care for sheep was ideal training for tending to the Almighty's flock, the Jewish people.

Adam Cohen is an airplane pilot, not a shepherd. But he understands the lesson of the pebbles.

Nicole Short-Wiebly said, ""It would have been sad not saying goodbye (to our father). It's very rare that someone stops and does something like this. We need more people like that in this world." That pilot, Adam Cohen, made an extraordinarily rare decision to return a plane to the gate. While the pilot could have been in trouble, the airline supported the decision. A Delta airlines spokesman said, "This .... pilot’s decision to return to the gate in this special circumstance is a great reflection of the human touch ..." For his part, Captain Cohen said, "This is something we’ll take with us, knowing we made a difference. Little moments like this to us are big to these customers and keep them coming back to Delta, but at the end of the day, it also keeps us going."

The Short family said that Adam Cohen's gesture made all the difference. They arrived in Memphis in time to say goodbye to their husband and father.

On a national level, Moses took the Jewish people out of exile. On an individual level, there are so many lonely people in a personal exile. We can help them with our words and actions. They’re crying out for friendship. Show them that you appreciate them for the people they are, not for what they have achieved. Try saying hello to them without asking them for something. Exhibit a normal human connection. The winter months with fewer outdoor activities are an ideal time to pick up the phone and call someone who would appreciate hearing from you.

Moses was one person, yet he led a nation out of exile. It all began when he felt the jabs of the pebbles. It is time for us to get out and touch people. Let’s free people from their individual exile. We can begin by emulating Moses’ path, feeling the despondency of others, and extending our hands and hearts so that we might all go home soon, together.