

Last week was a big week in my family. On Sunday, my sister-in-law got married. On Thursday, Eliza started kindergarten. And on Wednesday, a book arrived in the mail. That book was *But Not the Armadillo*, the long-awaited sequel to Sandra Boynton's classic work, *But Not the Hippopotamus*.

Behold the Armadillo, with his armadillo nose.

That nose can take him anywhere. He follows where it goes. It leads him to some cranberries. It leads him to some flowers.

He gives a yawn and settles down and takes a nap for hours.

And now for Armadillo Jumps on Armadillo toes!

Again he strolls along the road...and meets someone he knows

From far away, a song delights those armadillo ears.

He walks and walks and walks and walks...to find the song he hears.

A happy hippo dashes by. She wants to run and play.

But not the armadillo. No. He goes the other way.

No, not he armadillo. He doesn't like to hurry.

Please stroke his armadillo nose and tell him not to worry.

This story, ostensibly meant for children, focuses on the wanderings of an armadillo. He first appeared on the final page of *But Not the Hippopotamus*, a story about a sad hippo who only wants to be included with the other animals. In the end, the animals invite that hippo to join them, and the final line of the book is “but not the armadillo.”

We are left to think that the armadillo was still excluded by the other animals. But here we learn that this may have been exactly what the armadillo wanted. Unlike the hippopotamus that is desperate to run and play, the armadillo goes the other way.

But where is this armadillo going? What is he trying to do? It would be so much easier to understand and support him if we understood the goal of his journey. And yet, it seems like the wandering is an end in itself. The armadillo’s path is without destination. Indeed, we wonder if he is on a path at all.

My friend and colleague, Rabbi Evan Ravski, introduced me to the work of the hiker and author Robert Moor, who draws a distinction between the idea of a path and a trail. A path looks to the future, we travel a path in order to arrive at a specific destination. In contrast, a trail is what follows behind – it doesn't exist until someone or something creates it and it doesn't necessarily lead anywhere.

In a Jewish context, we have a third option, beyond that of a path or a trail. We have the idea of a דרך *derech*. The דרך *derech* does not emphasize where we are going, although that can be a component. The דרך *derech* does not worry about where we have been, but it is aware. The דרך *derech* focuses on the journey itself. Who is traveling upon it, and how we perceive the experience.

Working within this metaphor, the armadillo is clearly not travelling along a path, his destinations, such as they are, are temporary. He is also not following a trail, his direction is his own, and he is unconcerned with where he has been. Instead, he is journeying along his own personal דרך *derech*. He is perfectly content to find enjoyment in the journey itself.

A moment ago, we sang together,

דַּרְכֵיהָ דְרָכֵי־נְעִים וְכָל־נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם:

D'racheha darchei-noam v'chol-n'tivoteha shalom.

Her ways are pleasant ways, And all her paths, peaceful.

These words come from the book of Proverbs and speak to the role that Wisdom should have in our lives. Our tradition identifies Wisdom with the Torah itself, which is why we use this verse to conclude the Torah service.

Thus, we are saying that the ways of the Torah are pleasant, דַּרְכֵי נְעִים *darchei noam*. When we carry the Torah with us, both literally and metaphorically, we carry with us a text that guides us in every moment. It is the foundational text of a Jewish life, the one book that we could never do without.

While we sing these words every Shabbat, they carry special resonance on Rosh Hashanah. This is the moment when we set the path for our coming year. By engaging with these words as we return the Torah to the ark, we invoke them as a promise: if we choose a path that includes the Torah, if we take it with us on our journeys, it will make our ways pleasant, whatever our destination.

In looking at this verse, The Metzudat David emphasizes the power of the Torah to make our דרך *derech* pleasant. He writes that when we are working to fulfill the words of the Torah, it is impossible to encounter any sort of an obstacle. When we carry to Torah with us on our journeys, we will always have the wind at our backs and all of our paths will be דרכי נעם *darchei noam*. While we can all come up with examples of situations when this was not our experience in life, the value that he expresses resonates: the Torah adds meaning to our lives and carrying it with us should always make our paths more pleasant.

Where does this leave our Armadillo? Does the דרך *derech* that we see him follow include Torah? He does not seem to carry anything with him. Can we honestly describe it as דרכי נעם *darchei noam* as he wanders alone through life, seemingly without purpose or destination?

There is a Baraita, an ancient teaching of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, preserved in the Talmud that reassures us as we embark on our journeys this year. He says בוא וראה כמה חביבין – ישראל לפני הקב"ה: שבכל מקום שגלו, שכינה עמהן

ureh kamah chavivin Yisrael lifnei HaKadosh Baruch Hu: sheb'chol makom shegalu, Shechinah imahen.

“Come and see how beloved Israel is before the Holy Blessed One: in every place where they were exiled, the Shechina, the Divine Presence, was with them.” Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai elaborates, bringing examples that demonstrate that God was present while our ancestors were slaves in Egypt and exiled in Babylonia, and concludes with a promise that God will be with us when we are redeemed from exile in the future.

On its face, this Baraita should reassure each of us as we embark on our journeys in the new year. No matter the דרך *derech* that we choose or our destination, the Divine Presence will be with us. כמה חביבין ישראל – *kamah chavivin Yisrael* – how beloved is Israel!

And yet, a closer look undermines this comfort that we feel. Shimon bar Yochai emphasized that God was with the Jewish people when they were exiled. He may have chosen these examples to reassure us. Biblically, exile was the harshest punishment that God could decree. experience. Saying that even at our lowest moments, when our very homes have been taken away, God will still be with us. These are the moments when we

are most likely to feel an existential angst and loneliness, to question our place in the world and the presence of God. It is in those moments, Rabbi Shimon says, that God travels with us.

Or, might he be saying that God only travels with us in those moments? Shimon bar Yochai was well known for his zealous emphasis on study and piety. He had no regard or respect for anyone who did not devote every moment to the Torah. He once said:

I have seen those of our generation destined for the world to come, and they are few. And if there are thirty of them, I and my son are among them. And if there are ten of them, I and my son are among them. And if there are two of them, I and my son are among them. And if there is only one, it is me.

It seems out of character for such a person to reassure us that no matter what we do with our lives, or which *דרך* *derech* we choose, God will travel with us. Instead, he might be saying “When you are forced into exile, then God is with you, and even that *דרך* *derech*, that path, will be *נעם דרכי* *darchei noam*. But when you choose to go astray, when you follow a path that leads you away from Torah and from where you are meant to be, God

will not travel with you, and you will not find the peace that you seek.”

Such a perspective would condemn the Armadillo and his carefree wandering. Rather than describing his journey as **דרכי נועם** *darchei noam*, it would be one of loneliness and isolation. He is cut off not only from the other animals of the story, but also from God, who has no interest in traveling with him.

I am not quite ready to give up on reconciling Shimon bar Yochai and the Armadillo. In spite of his reputation for religious zealotry, and in spite of this perfectly reasonable interpretation of his Baraita, I don't believe that this is what Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is actually claiming.

The final example that he gives does not have anything to do with the expulsion of the Jewish people, but rather with their return. He said -

Even when they are to be redeemed in the future, the Divine Presence will be with them, as it is written: “Then the Lord your God will return with your captivity.” It does not state: God will cause them to return, but rather it says: “God will return,” which teaches that the Holy Blessed One will return with them from among the exiles.

This final text does not demonstrate that God will go with us when we go into exile, but that God is with us as we return. Normally, when the prophets or our tradition discusses the end of exile, the metaphor we use is **קיבוץ גלויות** *kibutz galuyot* – the ingathering of the exiles. In this image, God goes out and collects all of the lost Jews from all the corners of the earth, bringing us back to where we are supposed to be.

But in the example that Shimon bar Yochai brings, God does not welcome us back, rather God returns with us. And the Hebrew root that appears over and over again in this passage is **שב** *shav*, the same root that gives us the word **תשובה** *Teshuvah*, repentance. God is not waiting to welcome us back when we do **תשובה** *Teshuvah*, God comes back with us. That is to say, God must be with us in the moment before we do **תשובה** *Teshuvah*, and God is with us even as we travel down the “wrong” path. As Shimon bar Yochai says, “How beloved is Israel!” Even when we find ourselves traveling what appears to be the wrong **דרך** *derech*, God is with us.

דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרָכֵי־נַעַם וְכָל־נְתִיבוֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם:

D'racheha darchei-noam v'chol-n'tivotaha shalom.

Her ways are pleasant ways, And all her paths, peaceful.

This verse is two-fold, referring to the pleasantness of the דרך *derech* and the peacefulness of the נתיבה *netivah*. Most read this as poetic styling, each half of the verse saying the same thing. Malbim, disagreed, and wrote that this was more than a poetic flourish. He believed that the דרך *derech* and the נתיבה *netivah* referred to two different aspects of our lives. The דרך *derech* refers to the communal wisdom and Torah that should guide all of society. It is a wide path that is meant for all of us to follow together. In contrast, the נתיבה *netivah* refers to our personal journeys, each unique to the individual – which is also guided by the wisdom of the Torah.

This interpretation is profoundly liberating. It shows us that there is more than one way to live an authentic life. More than one way to live an authentic Jewish life. Any life that is guided by wisdom, that carries with it the Torah and our tradition is one that embodies שלום *shalom*.

Malbim goes beyond giving legitimacy to pursuing our own paths, his understanding of this verse argues that we each

need to follow our own **נתיבה** *netivah*. While it may be pleasant to rely on communal wisdom and norms on the wide **דרך** *derech*, we can only find peace for ourselves, our families, and our community when we travel our own path of Torah.

Malbim teaches that each **נתיבה** *netivah* and **נתיבות** *netivot*, each individual path is an offshoot of the central **דרך** *derech*. It breaks off and comes back, leaves and returns, weaves in and out of each of the others.

This wide **דרך** *derech*, woven together by the millions of individual **נתיבות** *netivot* is richer, more beautiful, and stronger than it would be if we all travelled on the same journey. Sometimes we may stray too far, but we know that the **דרך** *derech* is there for us when we want to return.

At first glance, the Armadillo in our story appears to be alone. He wanders, explores, takes naps and seems to have little interest or interaction with others. And yet, the final line of the story hints at something different. “Please stroke his armadillo nose and tell him not to worry.” We are present with this armadillo. We are able to make his journey more peaceful, if we

make the effort. He brought us along with him, without even realizing it.

Who or what do we take with us on our journeys? Who or what will we carry along with us over the coming year?

Shimon bar Yochai promises us that God will travel with us. God will be with us when things are good, and when things are bad. God journeys with us into the depths and will be with us as we do teshuvah. That is a sign of God's love for us and does not depend on our choices or our actions.

We each must choose, every day, whether to follow the דרך *derech* laid out for the community, or our own personal נתיבה *netivah*. Our tradition teaches that when we make the choice to carry the Torah with us, on either path, we never journey alone. It is that feeling of connection, of having a place in the world, that transforms the journey of our lives into דרכי נעם *darchei noam*.