

Me and Kismet Vibe Like That

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Yesterday afternoon, I taught my first class as an adjunct professor at Hebrew Union College in New York. It was a dream come true for me.

Fifteen years ago, as I was approaching my rabbinic ordination, I was debating quite intently with myself: should I go into the congregational rabbinate, or should I continue in academics and pursue a Ph.D.?

After some helpful conversations with my mentor, I decided to take a congregational position as an assistant rabbi at Congregation BJBE in the suburbs of Chicago.

To be honest, I wasn't sure I would like it. But I was wrong: I *loved* it.

I learned that sometimes we think we know ourselves so well, but we really don't.

Not only did I love working in the congregation and being part of people's spiritual journeys, but I *thrived* there—at least I think so.

My experience proved the wisdom of what the Israelites said when God offered them the Torah: "*na'aseh v'nishma*—we will do, and we will understand."¹ Sometimes, you just can't understand *even yourself* until you try something outside your comfort zone.

As I built my career as a congregational rabbi and Karen and I started a family, I eventually figured the academic side of the rabbinate was just not going to happen for me. And I guess I was OK with that.

But then one day in 2011 or so, my senior rabbi at BJBE, Rabbi Karyn Kedar, asked me: "So, what about that Ph.D.?"

"Meh. I don't think that's going to happen anymore. I just have too much going on."

"No," she said. "You need to teach. Stop finding all the reasons to say 'no,' and start looking for reasons to say 'yes.'"

"Alright, if you think so."

So, I started looking for programs that might be interested in a part-time doctoral student.

Fortunately, my rabbinic alma mater, Hebrew Union College, said, "we can make it work for you." And in 2012, I began studying for a Ph.D. while also working full-time in the congregation.

It was a lot, to be sure, but as my grandfather Hy Stoller used to say, "people do what they want to do." If something is important enough to you, you'll find a way to do it. And this was important to me.

I will forever be grateful to Rabbi Kedar for her encouragement.

But life happens, and my journey took some unexpected turns—just like pretty much everyone’s does—and I wasn’t sure where it would lead eventually.

I relate to the line in this week’s parashah, which is also in the Haggadah: “*Arami oved avi*—My father was a wondering Aramean.”² A lot of times over the last number of years, I felt like the father.

Do you ever feel that way? Like you’re wandering through your life?

On paper, things look good, and on the surface at least, they *are*. But you know deep down that you’re not where you’re supposed to be, that you imagined something else for your life.

Fortunately for me, the most amazing opportunity came along. It wasn’t calculated or expected; it just kind of happened: and that was the opportunity to serve as the Senior Rabbi of Temple Beth-El of Great Neck.

I say all the time: I love this congregation, and I love living in Great Neck. I love all of *you*.

The congregants here, the culture here: it’s the perfect fit for me. And I hope you feel the same way.

And here’s something else I learned: When you are willing to take risks and make choices that just feel *right* with your soul—even if they seem irrational, even if you stand to lose a lot, even when plenty could go wrong—I believe the world opens up for you: doors open, opportunities come, and life seems to require a lighter touch.

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My favorite Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, taught that there are two types of people: People of Fate, and People of Destiny.³

People of Fate are passive: they are objects in their own life; they think the world happens to *them*. Whereas People of Destiny are active: they are the subjects of their own life, and *they* make things *happen*.

I have worked my tail off for years to be a Person of Destiny—doing everything I could to make my vision for my life come true.

And I know that, like Soloveitchik says, I have done a lot to create my own destiny.

And yet, as I look back on it, I have to give more credit to fate than I used to.

It’s not that I have been an object and just let the world happen to me. Far from it.

But there’s something about life that, no matter how intentional you are and how hard you work to engineer your own reality, sometimes the things that really change your life and eventually set you on the path you’ve searched for all along come almost in spite of your efforts.

We just *don’t* control *everything*. I believe that in the “mysterious realm of the spirit,”⁴ there are forces conspiring on our behalf to help us become the people we’re destined to be.

I call those forces “God.” And God loves every single one of us so much that God wants every one of us to become the best possible version of ourselves we can be.

That’s what I believe, anyway.

Coming to TBE enabled me to realize the kind of life I think I have envisioned for a long time, although before I set out on the journey, I wasn’t conscious enough of it—and didn’t even know myself well enough—to articulate it.

Today, I am bursting with gratitude—because I feel so blessed to be a rabbi to an amazing congregation with people who feel like “my people”; to live in what Lin Manuel Miranda called “the greatest city in the world”; *and* to be able to teach future clergy at Hebrew Union College.

“My cup overfloweth.” And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for that.

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In response to my Facebook post the other day about my new adjunct faculty position, one of my friends—a former congregant whom I haven’t seen in years but who knew a lot about my journey—said that this is “kismet.”

I have to admit, that’s a word I didn’t know. So, I looked it up.

Interestingly, Dictionary.com defines “kismet” as “fate” or “destiny.”

And you know what, it makes sense—because as I’ve learned, when it comes to becoming the person you’re meant to be, it takes a little bit of both.

And apropos of “both,” I’m going to bust a new rhyme that combines the wisdom of the Torah with the poetics of my daughter’s hero, Taylor Swift:

“Once I was a wandering Aramean acrobat / but now, me and kismet vibe like that.”⁵

¹ Exodus 24:7

² Deuteronomy 26:5

³ See Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny*

⁴ Phrase by Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, “The Faithful Shepherd”

⁵ Adapted from Taylor Swift, “Karma.” The original lyric is “Me and karma vibe like that.”