Lost and Found - Parashat Pinchas
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One of my favorite stories this week wasn't in the news section. It was tucked away in what newspapers sometimes call "The Optimist."

It was about a little dog named La Gorda, which affectionately means 'The Chubby one.'

La Gorda had been missing for nearly a month. Her owner, Ale García, had searched everywhere. She posted on Facebook, in neighborhood chat groups, followed up on sightings that always seemed to come a little too late. Still, she never gave up hope.

Then came an unexpected phone call.

Mexico had just won a World Cup match. Fans poured into the streets celebrating. Ale's brother

called, barely able to get the words out through his excitement. He thought he had just seen La Gorda... on Facebook Live.

She didn't believe him.

How could her chubby little dog have wandered four kilometers across the city to the stadium? It was far enough, and enough time had passed, that Ale had stopped imagining she would ever find her.

Then he sent the video.

There, in the middle of thousands of celebrating soccer fans, someone had lifted La Gorda into the air and was dancing with her in the middle of the celebration.

Ale knew immediately. La Gorda wasn't so gorda anymore after a month on the streets, but she recognized her the way a parent recognizes the back of a child's head across a crowded room. That was her dog.

Ale and a friend jumped into the car and raced to the scene. They started calling her name.

La Gorda! La Gorda! La Gorda!

Within moments, La Gorda came running.

She had lost fifteen pounds. She was limping. But she was alive.

The story gets even better.

After Ale posted about the reunion, strangers began sending her photographs and videos. During the month La Gorda had been wandering the city, people she had never met had been feeding her, giving her water, checking on her, making sure she was okay.

None of them knew she belonged to someone.

None of them had seen the missing dog notices.

They simply saw a vulnerable creature and cared.

It's a wonderful story. But what struck me wasn't the reunion.

It was all those unnamed people in between.

Judaism has a name for what those strangers were doing, even if they didn't know it.

Hashavat aveidah.

The mitzvah of returning what has been lost.

Most of us think that mitzvah begins when someone finds a wallet or a set of keys.

The Torah says it begins much earlier.

"You shall not see your fellow's ox or sheep wandering and ignore them. You shall surely return them."

But then comes the phrase that changes everything.

"Lo tuchal l'hitalem."

"You may not hide yourself."

The Torah doesn't first command us to return what is lost.

It first commands us not to pretend we didn't notice, not to decide that someone else's loss is none of our concern.

That phrase has been echoing in my mind this week because of another image in this week's Torah portion.

Near the end of Parashat Pinchas, Moses knows his life is drawing to a close. He asks God to appoint a new leader.

He prays that the people

"not be like sheep without a shepherd."

It's such an evocative image.

Yes a shepherd leads their flock to and from the fields, but if you have ever led a group of school children on a field trip you know part of shepherding is noticing when one wanders off and reigning them in, not leaving anyone behind.

The image is so powerful it's part of our High Holy Day liturgy when we say "As the shepherd seeks out the flock and makes the sheep pass beneath the staff, so do You number, count, and consider every living soul..."

Every living thing has value, leave no one behind.

The Midrash imagines that this is exactly why Moses was chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness in the first place. While tending sheep, one little lamb wandered away. Moses didn't dismiss it as one sheep among many. He searched until he found it drinking from a stream. Realizing the lamb had simply been thirsty, he gently lifted it onto his shoulders and carried it home.

God says, "Because you showed compassion for another's flock, you will shepherd My people."

Goodness begins with noticing.
So does holiness.

The people who fed La Gorda weren't trying to become famous.

They didn't know there would be a reunion.

They didn't know there was an owner desperately searching every day.

They simply refused to hide themselves. *"Lo tuchal l'hitalem."*

This all got me thinking, I wonder how many "La Gordas" we pass every week.

Not dogs.

People.

The newcomer standing alone at Kiddush.

The elderly congregant whose spouse always used to sit beside them.

The teenager who quietly stopped coming.

The neighbor whose grief has become so familiar that we've stopped seeing it.

The friend who says, "I'm fine," but if we stopped for a moment we'd notice they aren't fine.

The story of La Gorda made me cry, not because of the reunion but because of the care of strangers.

There is goodness in the world. In a week, a month, a year and more when all evidence has too often pointed to the contrary, I needed the La Gorda story, I think we all do.

This week I found myself wondering how easy it is to make a kvetch list. We all have one. The rude driver. The unhelpful customer service representative. The

politician who disappoints us. The stranger who makes the world feel just a little colder.

But what if we also kept a Mensch List?

The stranger who held the door.

The person who quietly paid for someone else's coffee.

The volunteer who stayed late.

The neighbor who moved in our garbage bins.

The anonymous people who fed a lost dog because they simply couldn't walk past suffering.

We live in a world that notices outrage. Judaism asks us to notice goodness.

Maybe that, too, is a form of *hashavat aveidah,* returning lost items.

Maybe one of the things we've lost is our ability to see everyday holiness.

This Shabbat, may we become more observant Jews. Not only of mitzvot, though I hope that as well. More observant of people. More observant of kindness. More observant of those who have wandered and those who quietly help bring them home.

Shabbat Shalom.