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## Hagar's Lost

In last week's parashah, we learn about Hagar, an Egyptian princess who was welcomed into the home of Avraham and Sarah. The Torah describes how she fled to the desert, where she encountered an angel who instructed her to return. She became pregnant and eventually gave birth to Yishmael.

In this week's parashah, Yitzchak is born — thirteen years after Yishmael — and Avraham is commanded by Hashem to send Hagar and Yishmael away (*Bereishis* 21:12).

The Torah describes her departure with the words וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתְּתַע — “she went and wandered.” Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that this means she returned to the ways of her father's house in Egypt, i.e., to idolatry. According to this interpretation, וַתֵּלֶךְ should not be translated as “wandering,” but rather as “straying.”

However, it's unclear whether Rashi is giving a precise translation of the word וַתֵּלֶךְ or merely quoting a drush. Fascinatingly, earlier in this same parashah (20:13), Rashi quotes this very *passuk* and writes that anyone who is exiled from his place and is unsettled — wandering — is called a תועה.

If so, how did the Midrash know that Hagar was returning to her idolatrous roots? After all, when we are first introduced to her (chapter 16), it is Sarah who suggests that Avraham have a child with Hagar. Not only does Hagar bear a child to Avraham, but she also speaks with angels — and according to those who identify Keturah with Hagar (*Bereishis* 25), she eventually remarries him.

Clearly, she was an extremely righteous woman. Why then would the Midrash portray her as returning to idolatry?

Rav Motel Progomantsky explains that there is no such thing as a Jew being “lost.” The Torah's use of a term that implies wandering, unsettledness, or straying hints that she was not following the spiritual path she had once been on. Thus, the Midrash teaches that it wasn't merely that she left Avraham's home — it was that she was “returning to her idolatrous roots.”



We can add that this also clarifies how Avraham could later remarry her. The Midrash explains that her name Keturah comes from *ketores*, because her deeds were as beautiful as incense. Her “straying” was not open idol worship — rather, it was a lapse in perfect faith, a failure to recognize that she was exactly where she was meant to be and still under Hashem's protection.

None of us would consider ourselves idol worshippers, yet at times we too struggle to remain calm and to fully believe that Hashem is always with us.

### RAV MOTEL WASN'T LOST

The legend behind this *vort* isn't a parable or a nice thought. It happened. With Rav Mottel.

There are stories that we tell because they move us — stories of a Yid who felt lost, out of place, until he realized that he was exactly where Hashem wanted him to be. That every “mistake” in a Yid's journey is really choreography from Above.

## ר' מרדכי פוגרומנסקי

Rav Motel Pogromansky was born in Tavrig, Lithuania, in 1903. Unlike many other gedolim, he was raised in a more traditional environment, without a regular *cheder* education, and he didn't begin learning Gemara until his teenage years. Even before the age of thirteen, he was already running a successful business.

The Rav of Tavrig noticed his remarkable qualities, and when Rav Eliyahu Lopian came to recruit students for Kelm, he brought Rav Motel with him. Rav Lopian was extremely proud of this and remarked, "If I came to this world only for this, it was worth it," adding that it would be his passport to Olam Habah. According to Rav Motel's first tutor, he quickly advanced in his learning and became very proficient in Gemara.

From Kelm he went on to Telz, where he immediately joined the highest shiur — something almost unheard of in the structured Telz Yeshivah. He became known as the Tavriker Illuy.

To illustrate his brilliance: at one point he realized that he had never learned Maseches Yevamos, so he spent three days and nights mastering the entire *masechta*.

By the age of twenty, he was already giving shiurim. He had a unique gift for explaining the most complex concepts with clarity, combining depth with eloquence. His *mussar va'adim* inspired *talmidim* deeply. Although he held himself to very high standards (as Rav Gifter attested), he was also worldly and practical, able to offer wise and grounded advice (as noted by Rav Dovid Zoretsky).

Rav Motel's legacy lived on especially through his close relationship with Rav Gifter, who later became Rosh Yeshivah of Telz. Rav Gifter often quoted his Torah and *mussar* ideas, praising him in many *sichos* and shiurim. In one letter, Rav Gifter described him as a true genius, noting that all the *gedolim* who met him were impressed by his mastery of both Torah and Aggadah.

Eventually, Rav Motel left Telz and learned in Kovno, where he impressed the city's Rav, the Dvar Avraham. The Dvar Avraham wrote that "even hundreds of years ago, he would have been considered an *illuy*."

He survived World War II in the Kovno Ghetto through numerous miracles. After the war, he made his way to France, where he devoted himself to helping survivors — offering emotional support, guidance, and *mussar*. He became involved in the newly established Yeshivah there.

In 1949, he married Bluma Shtrom, but tragically, he passed away just a year later — on 25 Shevat 1950.

Although he gave many *shiurim* and *shmuessen* throughout his life, inspiring countless *talmidim*, only one of his articles was published during his lifetime — in a Telz Torah journal in 1939. Rav Dovid Cynamon later published Doresh Tov, based on what he heard from Reb Shimon Segal, who had been with Rav Motel in the Kovno Ghetto.

A few years ago, Rav Dov Eliach collected and organized everything known about this gaon and produced a masterpiece biography spanning 592 pages. Recently, Rav Moshe Shternbuch also published many of his own remarkable encounters with Rav Motel.

And one of those stories... as it occurred to Rav Mottel is when he enlightened us with the explanation of the Midrash.

It was just after the war. Rav Mottel was traveling by train together with Rav Avraham Yitzchak Finkelstein, a *shochet* and a *mohel*. They were on their way to perform a *bris* for a seven-year-old boy — the son of an old Telzer from before the *churban*.

At some point along the way, they realized something was wrong. The stops didn't match, the route was unfamiliar — they were on the wrong train. There was nothing to do but get off at the next station, somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak was beside himself. They had a mission! A child was waiting!

But Rav Mottel said, "A Yid is never lost — א.א. איך בלאגדזשעט ניט." The implication was, "If we're here, it's because we're meant to be here."

He told Rav Avraham Yitzchak the *vort* about Hagar in the desert. The Torah says ותתע ותלך, that she went and she strayed. Rashi explains that she returned to the ways of her father's house. Why? Because Rav Mottel saw another layer in Rashi: a Jew never is never lost, Hashem is guiding the steps.

A few moments later, the train stopped. They got off. A small, unfamiliar town. A few scattered houses. And then a Yid who could hardly believe his eyes when two religious Jews appeared. His wife had just given birth a week earlier, but there was no *mohel* in town and no way to travel out.

"Tell me," he stammered, "are either of you a *mohel*?"

Rav Mottel smiled again. "As a matter of fact, he is," he said, nodding toward his companion — "and he even has his *mila* equipment with him."

That baby boy — alone in a distant town — merited a *bris* on the eighth day. The *mohel* was Rav Avraham Yitzchak Finkelstein. And the *sandek*? Rav Mottel Pogromansky himself.

Later, Rav Mottel explained the events on an even deeper level. "Because the proper order," he said, "is to do a *bris* on the eighth day before one delayed beyond it, Hashem arranged that we take the wrong train — so the right baby would be first."

A wrong train, a missed stop — or a perfectly timed detour designed in Heaven.

Because a Yid is never lost.