

## Regardless of Goals and Achieved Results – A Yom Kippur Reflection

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*Feyga's grave from 2017  
cemetery survey*



*Inside sector one  
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The backstory for this reflection can be found in JRC's, book, Lost and Found, in an essay entitled "Negotiating with History." At the time of the book's publication, I thought there would be only one chapter. This is chapter two.

I wrote this reflection under the spell of what I call *metameglia*: the curse of creative self-awareness. When I informed Rabbi Weiss of my summer travel plans and she suggested I deliver a Yom Kippur personal reflection, I instantly felt the pressure to produce something deeply personal, seasonally inspirational, thoroughly engaging, but not excessively vulgar. All while being of some literary merit, suitable for the Moth, This American Life or, dare I say it, the back page of the New Yorker.

This summer, I heeded Donald Trump's advice and went back to where I came from or—more accurately—where my mother came from; a small town called Lipkani in the 31-year-old country of Moldova, 5,037 miles that way.

Last December, my mother sent my brother and me an email with the subject line: "My Mother's Tombstone."

My maternal grandmother, Feyga, died when my mother was three years old. My mother has no memory of her and was not at the funeral. I did not even know of Feyga's existence until my father let it slip that I was not related to the wonderful woman I called bubba all my life.

As a child of a Holocaust survivor, I carry a hole of sadness. It is dark. It is empty. Having learned of transgenerational trauma, I wondered if this hole was created 84 years ago when Feyga mysteriously disappeared from my mother's life. Finding her grave seemed a much-needed balm for her and for me.

Despite the many years of neglect, the photograph of Feyga's grave, taken in 2017 by a cemetery survey crew, looked remarkably sound in the Spring sun. From the top: Feyga Bat Yosef, beloved wife of Haim Yehuda Weinshenker. Died 15 Shevat 5695. (January 19, 1935). Below are indecipherable words and the reason I went to Moldova. Maybe there were comforting words for the daughter she left behind.

I am by nature a planner. I don't like surprises. But in this quest, I was remarkably sanguine to trust fate. Since the survey report provided the exact position of her grave, what else did I need?

The answer to that question was a stable climate. As I wait for my flight, a thunderstorm creeps over O'Hare, eating away my two-hour layover in Warsaw.

I email my guide, Zoya, to alert her I will not make my connecting flight to Lviv, where my driver Dima is scheduled to meet me at 7:30 pm. Zoya reassures me that all will be well. I set my phone to airplane mode and hand myself over to fate.

Landing in Lviv at one in the morning, I find Zoya's optimism to be justified. As I pass through Ukrainian customs, I see Dima holding a handwritten sign greeting DAVID TOBACCO. I am touched that he translated my Russian surname.

Dima speaks no English. I speak no Ukrainian. We get by with our Russian—his strong; mine not so much.

I step into a van with no seatbelts. I ask him how long the drive will be, expecting 30 minutes to be the answer. Dima says: "It takes five hours, but I can do it in four. We are taking the good road." Dima points the van south and sets it to warp speed.

The "good" road is a series of potholes held loosely together by asphalt, sluicing through an agrarian landscape with farmhouses no more than ten feet from the road. At each turn, rise or dip in the road, I am inertia's plaything.

Twenty-one hours of travel and anxiety finally catches up with me. I drift off. Suddenly Jesus is standing front of us annunciated by the van's high beams. I do not find it odd that I dream of the savior as I am only too willing to swap faith for absolution.

It isn't a dream and isn't the real Jesus; it's a five-foot-something statue of him, standing by the roadside with outstretched arms like a traffic cop, warning unsuspecting motorists that a sharp left turn is required.

Dima mutters an obscenity and cranks the wheel as far as it will go. The tires squeal like a boys' choir. I want to close my eyes to the inevitable sound of metal, plaster and apostasy, but I have to witness Jesus' latest sacrifice. The van's bumper miraculously clears the savior by inches, but the passenger-side mirror lops off Jesus' index and middle fingers. I watch them bounce into a culvert, as Christ teeters and disappears from sight.

Dima observes: "Sometimes the savior needs to save himself."

Two hours later, the van ascends a hill paved with centuries-old cobble stones. At five-thirty a.m., Dima delivers me to the Allure Inn of Chernivsti, Ukraine, bleary-eyed, seasick and agnostic. He hands me my bag, promising to return in six hours to take me to Lipkani.

A short nap later, Zoya shows up with Dima and Pavel. Apparently, Zoya forgot to renew her passport and cannot leave the Ukraine. Pavel is my new guide.

It takes 45 minutes to cross the border. A Ukrainian border guard speaks to Dima, who explains the nature of our visit. The guard glances at my passport and shrugs apparently unmoved by quixotic quests. We have to pass through three stations on the Moldovan side. The border guard at the third station is a young woman with sympathetic eyes. In broken English, she tells me she, too, is from Lipkani. Although, I am thirty years her senior, she says I am a "nice boy" to visit my grandmother's grave and waves us on.

We then face the challenge of finding a Jewish Cemetery that isn't on the map in a town that hasn't had a Jewish resident for 50 years. We stop at gas stations, markets, and ask farmers passing us on ancient Soviet tractors. Everyone we meet is as helpful as possible, pointing in the most likely direction— which, hauntingly, is the road to Transneistra, the final stop for most Lipkani Jews in 1941.

On a dirt road heading out of town, we stop at a small garage in which three men and a boy are fixing an engine. Dima asks them if they know where the old Jewish cemetery is and this time there are smiles. "Os' tut," they say, pointing across the road at a crumbling stone building with a rusting metal gate. "Right there."

Armed with the cemetery survey report, the photo, a copy Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Dirge Without Music," a prized stone that Denise harvested on a family trip, a packet of Israeli soil, and a small, brown-and-yellow kippah, I hop out of the van, sensing that the journey of 80 plus years is at an end.

Sadly, the Lipkani cemetery is not as I imagined. Neglect and climate change have transformed it into a field, overrun by weeds and trees. The caretaker's house could use some care taking of its own. Its tin roof is listing and will soon collapse. In the near future, the encroaching vegetation will erase the cemetery completely.

The survey report informs me that the field of knee-high grass, punctuated by crumbling tombstones in front of me is sector three. To my right, in the words of the report: "scattered tombstones. Some graves in the woods, impossible to photograph"—sector four. At the base of the hill, are graves from the Soviet period, tall, black and emotionally overwrought—sector two.

To my left lies sector one, which, according to the report, is the most “accessible portion” of the cemetery. To me, it looks like the Amazon rain forest.

Clearly the report’s author and I have different definitions of accessible. Dima and Pavel cast wary glances at each other and ask me: “You’re sure this is the right place?”

“Yes. Sector one, row 24, plot 33.” I show them the picture. The stone is clearly visible. Starting where row one should logically be, I slalom down the hill.

Row three is seriously impinging on row two’s personal space. Row four does not appear to be a row at all, but merely a pile of rocks and weeds. Row five is doing its best Ozymandias impression. Row six through ten weave in and out of each other like a summer camp friendship bracelet. I have a queasy feeling that row 24 is, at best, open for interpretation.

Plunging in, I am quickly overwhelmed by lanky trees. Kraken-like vines wind around my chest and legs, threatening to pull me under. The Moldovan version of kudzu obscures fallen stones and open burial vaults, leading me to step soddently into God-knows-what or God-knows-who. Roses, once so lovingly placed on graves, have grown into a concertina wire of thorns that puncture me like darts.

As I stumble out the other side of sector one, Dima and Pavel are sitting on a wall. “Nashol?” Dima asks me in Russian (did you find it?) “Nyet,” I reply. A cloud moves aside, illuminating a portion of sector one that is open to the sky with the tombstones erect as a city skyline, just like the picture of Feyga’s tombstone. I realize I have counted from the left side of the sector and not the right. As a Jewish cemetery, it stands to reason they numbered the plots from right to left.

With renewed spirit, sunburned head and increasing dehydration, I stride to the first row by the wall and begin to count. 18, 19, 20: I notice I am marching past a thicket of trees. By row 24, I am back in the morass. I count 33 graves in, losing confidence in my count at 18. No Feyga. Back to square one.

Maybe it is a matter of definition. I count 33 rows down and march in 24 graves. Mo luck. I go to the other side of sector 1 and count 33 rows down and 24 graves in. Again, no Feyga.

My Apple watch praises me for completing my required steps so early in the day but cautions that my heart rate is elevated.

Dima and Pavel are talking to a farmer whose aunt used to clean the cemetery to feed her cattle. She died two years ago and now lies comfortably buried in the well-kept Christian cemetery near the center of town.

I sit down to rest on someone’s grave, ruing my failure to plan. How could this day be any worse?

Fate is only too happy to answer as my phone buzzes with a FaceTime request from my mother. She has tilted her laptop at an angle that reveals just her forehead and anxious grey eyes. "Did you find the grave?" she asks. "Did you?"

I try to breathe. "No, I can't find her."

"But you have the report, right? Are you sure you aren't looking in the wrong place? In the picture, the grave looks so obvious."

As my mother contemplates my idiocy, all I can muster is "I'm sorry, Mom. I can't find her."

"Oh, that's disappointing. That's disappoint..." Moldova's inconsistently robust cellular service, called Moldcell, joins the pile-on party with a hearty "call failed" message.

Frustrated and sad, I vow to try one more time. I stomp down the hill to count out 24 rows and plummet inward, sure that someone/something will take pity on me. But I do not find the stone and my last step out of the jungle is predictably a prat fall, spewing me, my papers, my kippah, Denise's stone, and my bag of Israeli soil, to the ground and the amusement of Dima, Pavel, and the farmer.

"Nashol?" Dima asks.

Dusting myself off, I shake my head: "It would be easier finding Doctor Livingstone than my grandmother's grave." Silence as Pavel translates. More silence. You never feel loneliness' sting quite like when you laugh alone in a foreign land.

My phone shivers in my pocket. I don't have to look at the screen to know who it is.

"Hey, mom," I pant.

"David," she says. "I want you to stop. You are scaring me. You are out of breath. You are sweating and I am afraid you are going to have a heart attack. Please. Please stop looking. You traveled all that way. You tried and it means a lot to me. Please," her voice breaks. "Please," she whispers.

At that moment, I feel forgiven, but most importantly, I forgive myself.

I tried. What felt like failure 11 years ago now has the scent of selflessness, spiced with the precise amount of folly.

After all, what can I reasonably expect to happen if I had found Feyga's grave? Would my mother's trauma be relieved? Would mine? Of course not. I would probably kick myself for believing it was even a possibility.

Perhaps this is a mere rationalization for not finding Feyga's grave, or maybe for believing there is a single key that opens the door to self-acceptance once and for all. But by failing to find Feyga's grave, I protected myself from the inevitable disappointment that would have accompanied finding her grave. Dima is right: sometimes you have to save yourself.

Before I lose my mom, I promise I will stop looking.

I dump the Israeli soil at my feet, read the poem, say Kaddish and toss Denise's stone into the middle of the forest. It lands with a splash.

"Let's go," I say to Dima and Pavel, who are only too happy to leave this resting place of the forgotten.

The next evening, as I wait for Dima to pick me up for the 19-hour trip home, I stop in the restroom in the lobby of the Allure Inn. Above the urinal is a sign, written in Ukrainian and English with all the earnestness and clarity of a Delphic oracle is:



*Sign over urinal in Allure Inn  
Chernivsti, Ukraine*

"Regardless of your goals and achieved results, please flush the toilet."

I am buoyed by this apt coda for my journey.

One last thought on this Yom Kippur day. While we ask for forgiveness from and forgive others; we must reserve space for forgiveness of ourselves, our failures, our near misses, our miscalculations, our follies. In the end, trying is just as important as succeeding. And, if it gives us a good story, it is better. For in our stories we live, in our stories we are safe, and in our stories, we are remembered.

*Gmar hatima tovah.* May your stories be deeply personal, seasonally inspirational, thoroughly engaging, of some literary merit, but not excessively vulgar.