

Missed Connections"  
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I came across a book, and I am not sure I want to recommend it to you but, I do want to discuss it with you. It's titled, "Small Miracles, Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life". It is a collection of brief vignettes which the authors Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal insist are true and culled from their personal interviews as well as from research in newspapers, television, books and various other sources. What they have in common is that they are all stories of extraordinary coincidences that the authors believe point to things beyond mere chance. To be honest, I am skeptical - that is why it is hard for me to recommend this book. And yet, some of these stories have set me to thinking and that is why I share them with you today.

There is one story that is written by a reporter who admits to reading the "personals" column in various newspapers as entertainment. The reporter explains, "I have been married for nineteen years and am certainly not looking for another spouse, yet I am utterly riveted by these ads. The drama of everyday life that is reflected in them. One day," this reporter writes, "I was scanning the personals column of a local newspaper when I was stopped short by one particular ad: 'Henrietta - do you remember we met and courted at Camp Tamiment in 1938? I've never forgotten you. Please call me. Irving...' and it was followed by a phone number rather than the more common PO Box ID. "Is this some kind of joke?" the reporter asked herself. But all night long she couldn't get that ad out of her mind. "Those personal ads cost a lot of money," she thought. "Why would someone waste so much money on a joke? Finally she decided she had to know the truth, so she called the number in the ad. As soon as the mature voice answered, she knew this was no joke, but the real thing. She felt badly raising the elderly man's expectations, even momentarily and began by saying, "Uhh.. this is not Henrietta, I'm sorry, but I was so intrigued by your ad, I just had to call and find out...what's the story?" Gracious and courtly in a manner that is unfortunately out of style these days, Irving amiably accommodated her inquisitiveness and shared the following story: "In 1938, Henrietta and I were both counselors at Camp Tamiment, an overnight camp in Pennsylvania and we fell in love. We were sure that we were right for each other, that we had found 'the one.'" However, Henrietta's parents did not agree. She was seventeen at the time, and they felt she was much too young to get involved in a serious relationship. So in the fall, to get her away from me, they sent her to stay with an aunt in Europe, and she lived there for several years. There she met another man, whom she married. Heartbroken, I too moved on with my life and eventually married someone else. I never loved my wife in quite the same passionate way I loved Henrietta, but we had a good marriage. My wife died three years ago, and I've been very lonely ever since. Lately, I've started to think about Henrietta a lot, and I've begun wondering if she is still alive. And if she is alive, whether she is still married. Well you get the picture. Maybe I 'm just a foolish old man, but I was hoping that maybe Henrietta would see the ad, or at least someone who knows her..." And his voice trailed off. The reporter went on to say how she was touched by Irving's recital, and found herself marveling at the essence of hope that resides in the human

spirit. She asked Irving if he minded if she did a story about his search, and he agreed. Unfortunately, the reporter's editor was not as impressed and nothing came of the story, but since she was still interested to learn of any outcome and had in the process formed an affection for Irving - she kept his number and called him from time to time to see how things played out. Sadly, he never got the phone call he was waiting for.

Two years after the reporter had first made contact with Irving, she was riding on the Number 1 Uptown subway in Manhattan and was again engrossed in reading the personals columns of a local newspaper, when she heard a soft chuckle beside her. "Looking for a new husband, my dear?", the woman sitting next to her inquired with a laugh, looking pointedly at her wedding band and then at the personals page spread clearly on her lap. "Oh," she blushed, a trifle embarrassed. "I just read them for fun. You know, out of curiosity." "Not me," she said shaking her head adamantly, "Too much pathos in those pages. They would break my heart, those ads.." In one of those rare but fascinating exchanges that can only happen on the New York Transit System, the reporter turned to the woman and said, "In a way, you are right, there is a lot of pathos in these pages." And the reporter proceeded to tell her the story of Irving's tender quest for Henrietta. The woman seemed fascinated by the tale, and listened with rapt attention. "Well," the reporter finally concluded, "I wish I could give the story a happy ending and tell you Irving found Henrietta, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. Either Henrietta is already dead, or she lives in another city, or she just doesn't read the personals." "It's the third choice, my dear," the woman said, patting the reporter's arm gently. "Trust me, I know." Startled, the reporter looked at the lined face that held vestiges of a regal beauty that had long since lost its bloom. "Do you still have Irving's number?" she asked.

I have such mixed emotions about that story. Do you think it really happened the way the reporter said it did? Or is it creative fiction? The romantic in me would love to believe in stories like that. The skeptic in me feels the world operates in a crueler, harsher fashion. My friend and colleague Rabbi Neil Kurshan suggested that the story is a bit dated - nowadays all Irving would have had to do was sign on to the Internet and post a message on Craig's List. Rabbi Kurshan pointed me in the direction of Craig's List, specifically to the section titled: "Missed Connections" which has served as a clearing house for optimists seeking second chances like our friend Irving. "You got off the train at Civic Center; you were wearing a crisp clean cotton white button down under a navy cashmere v-neck sweater, indigo "jean" slacks and black loafers. You looked at me. Such conviction. Mysterious too. I knew I had to meet you, talk to you. But I didn't. We made eye contact several times waiting for the next train...you never said a word. You sat near me and got off with me at Oakland/12th Street. I wish I had the nerve to speak to you. We kept "sneaking" glance after glance. I couldn't believe you were looking, staring at me. Please contact me and let's find out over coffee if there is a continuing conversation." Or another one that read: "Saw you on the "A" train Tuesday night. We were riding in the first car and we sat across from one another. There were two men who entered the train and sang for money, and you and I exchanged a friendly glance and smiled. You have brown hair and were wearing a blue tie and a suit. I was wearing a long black skirt and blue blouse..I was reading the DaVinci Code. I think you're cute and would like to get to know you better." These messages are just a couple of a collection of thousands of

wistful notes that can be found on this web site. Since the year 2000, Missed Connections has indeed become a clearing house for those seeking a second chance. Seven thousand postings appear each month on the New York Site alone. Many of these missed encounters seem to happen on subways perhaps because there more than most other places people yearn to overcome the anonymity and depersonalization that they feel below ground. But other messages are written by waitresses longing to connect with a late night customer, by a jogger passing another runner on an early morning street; or by a dancer at a nightclub gazing across a crowded room at someone on the other side of the dance floor. Missed Connections has even spawned a Jewish version called: "AlmostMetJew.com" with more specific locations of missed encounters such as the "Salute to Israel Parade", Dougies Kosher Restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan or the B68 bus in Coney Island.

Now while most of us over 40 have never heard of Missed Connections on Craig's List or AlmostMetJew.com the truth is that these missed connections are not new to the Internet, and like Irving in my original story, many of us carry around with us regret over the connections we have missed in life.

Missed connections are not only rendezvous on subways that never happened; they are also career opportunities we never pursued, passions or interests we never developed, or relationships that we never deepened. All of us carry on our back a bundle of regrets for those things that might have been but which never were.

Since I am in the story telling mood today, I will share with you another story from that book, "Small Miracles". The authors insist this one is true as well - you be the judge.

It is the story of Joey Riklis (the story they say, is true, the name is a pseudonym. He was born to an upper middle class Jewish family in Cleveland, Ohio. He rebelled fiercely when he was nineteen. Donning the faded, torn denim uniform of his generation, Joey Riklis dropped out of college, quit his part time job, and announced to his widowed father that he was taking off for India in search of "enlightenment." Sensitive and psychologically astute, his father, Adam Riklis, withstood this blow with equanimity and grace, heeding the advice of friends who counseled patience, tolerance and love. Joey was acting "normal" for his age, they explained confidently, and the storm would soon blow over, they were sure. But when Joey revealed one day that he had broken with his religion, his father snapped. Adam Riklis was a Holocaust survivor. His entire family had been murdered by the Nazis, and he alone had withstood the barbaric hardship of three concentration camps. He had pledged, as the sole survivor of his family, that those whom he had loved - had not died in vain. In Cleveland, Adam had been faithful to his Jewish traditions. He sent his children to Day School and took them to shul regularly. He was proud that he had raised religious children who would carry on the family's heritage. But now, his son was announcing that he was scorning this very legacy, making a mockery of his family's losses. He would have no part of this! "Get out of here!" He screamed at Joey. "Get out of my home and never come back! You are not my son. I disown you from my heart, from my soul, from my life. I never want to see you again!"

In India, Joey traveled from guru to guru, seeking wisdom, spirituality – concrete answers to life's elusive mysteries. Six years later, Joey accidentally encountered an old classmate from Cleveland on a street corner in Bombay. Joey and Sammy embraced happily. "This is unbelievable!" they told each other. They were avidly trading stories of their respective adventures when Sammy's eyes clouded and he said somberly, "Hey Joey, I was really sorry to hear about your dad." "My dad?" Joey repeated dumbly, "What do you mean?" "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Then you don't know, obviously." "Know what?" Joey asked with rigid dread. "Oh Joey, your father died a couple of months ago. No one wrote you?" "No one knew where I was." Joey replied slowly, dumbstruck by the news. "What did he die of?" "A heart attack." "Not a heart attack," Joey said, his eyes welling with tears. "More likely a broken heart, I'm sure. And I'm the cause, I killed him. I killed my own father." Joey, don't be ridiculous," his friend murmured, "You had nothing to do with your father's death." But Joey would not be convinced. For several days Joey lived in a stupor dazed with grief and remorse - in the back of his mind he had always hoped for reconciliation with his father somehow he had always been sure a loving reunion was in his future. Now he would never be able to ask his father's forgiveness, or return to the warm embrace of his love. And he would never have the closure, the resolution, that he so desperately needed. Talk about a missed connection. Finally he said to his friend- "I can't go on like this anymore. India tastes like ashes to me now. I know you will think I'm strange but I have to go to ...Israel!" "Why Israel?" his friend inquired. "I can't explain it, I just feel this pull - it is what my father would have wanted me to do." Joey made his way to Israel and traveled the country - trying to find his father and his father's faith in every place and each site. Finally he decided to visit the Kotel, The Western Wall, and there to pray for his father's forgiveness. Approaching the Wall, Joey looked from a distance at the clusters of people thronging the plaza. Ethiopians in African headdress, Yemenites in white robes, Americans in t-shirts - all coming to press their lips against the cool stones, cry warm tears, and fervently beseech God with their personal petitions. He borrowed a siddur and began to pray - he thought the words would be foreign to him after all these years, but instead they flowed from him in a familiar, comforting stream. He closed his eyes and recalled his father's intonation of these same words, as he was transported back in memory to the world of his youth. He decided to write a note, and place it in the wall - he remembered this custom from his studies as a child. Joey wrote: "Dear Father, I beg you to forgive me for the pain I caused you. I loved you very much and I will never forget you. And please know, that nothing that you taught me was in vain. I will not betray your family's death. I promise." When he had finished writing the note, Joey searched for an empty crevice - but all of the Wall's cracks were filled, crammed, overflowing with petitioners' notes, it took him some time to find a place where he could stuff in his small prayer. But for all his good effort - he still dislodged another note that had been resting there. He stooped to pick it up in a bit of a panic - not sure what to do with the fallen note. Overcome by curiosity, he decided to read the words of the unknown petitioner whose note he had dislodged. And this is what it said: "My dear son Joey, If only some day I could tell you how much I love you, I have always loved you. You are, and always will be, my beloved son. Please forgive a foolish old man who drove his son away." and it was signed, Adam Riklis, Cleveland Ohio.

Now I wasn't going to even take the time to share that story with you because I have serious doubts as to whether it is really true - even though the authors insist it is. I mean things like that - just do not happen. Do they? The thing I like most about this story is that it sets up the Kotel as a kind of precursor to Craig's List . The Kotel as the original clearing house for missed connections... now there is an idea. I have always had the theory that if you just stood at the Kotel long enough you would eventually see everyone that you ever knew. I mean at one point or another - we all make our way there - it is just a matter of timing.

Making connections - missing connections - we live in a world where it is so difficult and so often it is a matter of timing. Maybe the story happened, maybe it didn't - but this I do know - too often in life we miss the opportunity to say what is in our hearts or we fail to act because we fear embarrassment or rejection - and as a result connections are missed.

Yom Kippur presents us with the opportunity to re-establish our missed connections. All year long we get caught up in the details of our lives. We get inundated by the pressures of family or careers. Some of us during this past year have been overwhelmed by the difficulties and disappointments in our lives; others may have been caught up in life's joys. And then we come to shul on Yom Kippur, maybe that is part of the reason we look forward to coming to shul on these days. We hope to see some of the people with whom we have lost touch during the year. We need to share the news of a marriage, a new grandchild, or maybe on a sadder note the news of the death in our family, or a divorce or a separation.

Yom Kippur also calls on us to re-connect with our spiritual missed connections. We are so busy - we have so many good excuses - even God, I imagine, gets caught up, as it were, during the year, in the business of running the universe. But today we have time once again to re-connect. I imagine that if God had an internet address, he might post the following note each year, just before Yom Kippur on Craig's List, on Missed Connections: "another year has gone by and I have missed you. You may not have noticed Me, but I have been there - in the beauty of each sunrise and sunset. I was the love you felt for those closest to you. I was the joy when you rejoiced over the birth of your son, the marriage of your daughter. I was by your side when you were overcome by grief when your marriage fell apart or when you mourned the death of your father. I was in your room when you found the strength to apologize to your sister; I was in the courtroom when a terrorist was brought to justice. Occasionally you glanced at me, but you were in such a rush to get somewhere that you could not stay. I understand. But it has been some time since we have really talked, and I wonder if you missed me? I have missed you. Why don't we try and re-connect during the rest of this Holy Day? Let us spend the time left - talking, you and me. I can give you of my strength, and you can give me some of yours.

Soon we will recite Yizkor. At the heart of the Yizkor prayers are our missed connections. For some of us Yizkor recalls regrets we have never resolved. Someone we loved may have been taken from us before we healed a breach that had opened between us. They may have died estranged from us, and we yearn now to heal the connection.

Someone we loved may have died before we had a chance to say goodbye and speak our love. Someone may have been taken from us before we reached out to them with a word or gesture that would have brought them comfort in the waning days of their lives. Unlike Joey, we had no moment where a note fell from the kotel and satisfied all our longings, all our fears, all of our hopes - but we do have Yizkor. Yizkor is the time for missed connections - "I never told you how much I loved you while you were here. We danced around each other during the years of our lives never speaking the words that needed to be spoken between us. You died before I could tell you what was really in my heart. I wish I had the courage to tell you how you transformed my life. If you get this message, I will know that you have responded if I can find a measure of peace."

For some of us, Yizkor is about the connections we missed in life. For all of us it is about the connections we miss in death. Yizkor recalls for each of us the connections we once had, but which are no longer a part of our lives. The trust of a spouse, the support of a sibling, the confidence and unending love of a parent, the joy and faith in the future instilled in us by a child. Death makes it impossible for us to ever restore the fullness of these connections. Although those we love are not physically here, the lingering trace of their lives within us are part of our strength and our capacity to live and to love. Through the recitation of Yizkor we express not just our pain for their absence, but also our gratitude for the connections made. My friend Rabbi Neil Kurshan, who introduced me to this idea of missed connections said, "I do believe that for every missed connection some degree of re-connection is possible." I think he is correct. Our ability to re-connect only requires that we do teshuvah and heal the ruptured connections in our lives. For those distant from us because of hurt or anger, it often requires a word of apology or appreciation. In our spiritual lives it is simply a matter of waking up to the beauty of daily life and to the ordinary miracles that surround us and that are ever present. We need only see the promise of each new day and the kindness of those who love us. And regarding those whose physical presence will never again be part of our lives, our memory and remembrance can lessen the pain of their absence and remind us of their ongoing influence and spiritual presence in our lives.

Life passes us by so quickly. In the words of the Unetaneh Tokef, it is but a fading flower, a fleeting cloud, a passing shadow, a vanishing dream. It is a quick glance across the subway tracks into a train momentarily stopped in a station. Because transience is built into the fabric of our lives there will always be missed connections. The flower wilts in the passing season; the cloud skirts by on a breeze; the shadow disappears under the glare of the sun; the dream fades in the light of day. Inevitably the subway moves on to the next station. Rarely can we retrieve what might have been, and thus often we will regret our missed connections. But, neither are we dependent on an electronic message board, a want ad in the personals, or a note falling from the kotel. There are so many connections we can make on our own. Let this be a year of connections. Let this be a year when we reach out to those we love. Let this be a year in which our willingness to remember those no longer here - is not a source of pain - but of comfort and healing. Let this be a year in which we respond to God who on these days seeks to overcome our frayed connection. Let this be a year when we all reach out in teshuvah, love, and memory. Let this be a year of connections made rather than connections missed.