

**Yom Kippur Day
Why I love my GPS
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As a senior citizen was driving down the freeway, his car phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on the LIE. Please be careful!" "Heck," said Herman, "It's not just one car. It's hundreds of them!"

I don't know about you, but I empathize with poor old Herman. I often feel that everyone is going one way while I'm headed in the other direction. In fact I sometimes feel that it is my commitment to Judaism that has me going my way when everyone else seems to be headed somewhere else. A friend of mine once offered that a kosher fish has to have fins and scales because only a fish with fins and scales can swim against the tide.

It is hard work to swim against the tide. And one has to wonder if it is worth the effort to maintain your course when everyone else seems to be headed the opposite way? Well, I guess it depends on which of us is going in the right direction.

One of my most favorite new gadgets – and those of you who know me, know I love gadgets, so to say it is one of my favorite ones is quite a distinction – but, one that has really captured my heart and won my devotion – is the GPS, the Global Positioning System, you know, the thingamajig that goes in your car and connects to a satellite circling the earth and by using some fancy mathematical calculations always knows where you are and helps you to get where you are going. They are amazing! How did I manage without it? All you have to do is input the address of where you want to go – and it will figure out how to get there. Oh, I know, the science is still in its early stages and it sometimes calculates a circuitous route – but, it will get you there and I find that most reassuring and absolutely amazing. And if this were not incredible enough, the GPS has a couple of additional features that make it – well, miraculous. One is the "Go Home" button, which I will get back to in a few minutes, and the other is its ability to recalculate when I make a mistake. After you input your destination, the GPS quickly calculates a course how to get you from here to there, and begins instructing you to turn left in 500 feet or merge right –fantastic. Now, every now and then, for all her good efforts (by the way the fact that my GPS has a woman's voice does not trouble me at all – I would never be so obedient in taking directions from a man) but for all her good efforts to keep me on the straight and narrow, inevitably there will be times – too many times, when I wander off the proper path. She says left and I go right, or she says merge in 500 feet and I do it in 200 feet – and all her proper guidance and instruction is now for naught. I'm lost. But, this is where my GPS really shows her stuff. When I make a wrong turn, when I get off the designated path, when I do something differently than she had told me to do it, my GPS does not get angry with me. She does not chastise me, nor does she shout at me, -- she just pauses for a second, in a reassuring voice she says: "recalculating" and then comes up with a new way to get me back to the original path. And no matter how many times I do this and no matter how clearly she had laid out the right path for me – she never gets frustrated – she never loses faith in me – she just is there to help me get back on track. I love my GPS.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that was also why I love my Judaism and Yom Kippur in particular. Judaism too, has laid out a wonderful path for us. For,

thousands of years it has helped generation after generation of Jews get from here to there. In clear and precise terms it guides us and directs us in the way we should go. The *mitzvot* that we began speaking about on Rosh Hashanah are the directions that God has given us to navigate our lives. Instead of, “merge left in 500 feet”, our torah gives a different kind of direction, it tells us to feed the hungry in the coming year, care for the homeless in the coming days, honor our parents - now, bless our children-today, observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

And just as with my GPS, for all the torah’s good efforts to keep me on the designated path, inevitably I find myself not following these wise and time tested directions about how to live my life. I turn left when the torah tells me to turn right, I miss opportunities to feed and to care, to bless and to observe – my intentions were honorable, it’s just that my execution was off. And so, I soon find I have made some wrong turns and now I am lost. But, here is where my torah really shows *its* stuff. When I make a wrong turn, when I get off the designated path, when I do something differently than she told me to do it, my God, does not get angry with me. She does not chastise me, nor does she shout at me – she just sends me Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is the day when millions of Jews the world over gather in synagogues like ours. We sit quietly and contemplate the ways in which we have gone off track during the previous year. We are lost, and we know it – we know we should have been better parents or children, better husbands or wives, better friends or colleagues. We know exactly the wrong turns we made – we cringe as we think of some of the poor decisions we have embraced. We open our *mahzor* and these words of the ages speak to us – there is no anger in these words, no sense of chastisement, no disappointment – there is just a slight pause and then we are called upon to recalculate, and plot a new course back to the proper path.

Yom Kippur calls on us to recalculate. To determine which way each of us needs to go to get back to where we need to be.

This is no simple task. My father-in-law, may his memory be for a blessing, had a simple technique that he used if he got lost while driving – and remember, this was long before GPS. If he was in uncharted territory, and wasn’t sure whether to turn left or right – my father-in-law would say – “I’ll just follow the way most of the cars are going, after all *they* probably know where they are going!” We used to laugh—they probably did know where they were going, it just wasn’t clear that they were going where we wanted to go. Like the elderly gentleman in my opening example – it is not easy to go one way when everyone else seems so intent on rushing off in the other direction but before you start following everyone else – are you so sure that they are headed where you want to go? I address myself to those sitting here today who like to go with the flow, are you really so sure that the flow is headed the right way?

It is Yom Kippur --- time to pause, and recalculate.

“This,” declared Steve Jobs “is the year of the Iphone!” I wonder how many here own an Iphone that goes along with your Ipod and maybe even your Imac? Don’t you find it a little strange that one of the most successful corporate symbols of our generation is an apple with a bite taken out of it? You know that was originally our symbol. When Adam and Eve took a bite out of the apple it was supposed to be a permanent reminder of our human capacity for making the wrong choice, of the need to learn to make choices for oneself. Today, an apple with a bite taken out of it is a symbol for no choice: “I need an Iphone, I need an Ipod” -- it has

come to symbolize the things you just have to have because everybody else already has them and God forbid you should be the last one to have them. As my father-in-law might have said, “well, if they are all turning left, they probably know where they are going.” But, my father-in-law knew he was being silly – he was joking. What is our excuse? Today is the day we take ownership of the choices we have made. Today is the day we recognize that not all of our choices have been wise. (And I refer to more than purchasing your iPhone before the price went down)

One of the central prayers of this day places the agenda squarely before us: *Avinu Malkaynu Hatanu L'fanecha – Avinu Malkaynu, we have sinned against you!* We have lost our way!

And then we pause; waiting for that kindly voice to redirect us, showing us the way back to correct path --- (pause)

When I make a wrong turn in my car – my GPS is polite enough to inform me. It recalculates, it does the work for me and directs me back to the straight and narrow. *Avinu Malkaynu Hatanu L'fanecha* (Pause)

Aahh if it were only that simple when it comes to *teshuvah!* Most of us are pretty good at recognizing when we have made a wrong turn in life. It is pretty much as obvious in life as it is on the road. The problem is that some of us naively come to shul hoping to hear the voice of God functioning like my GPS, politely directing us back to the proper path doing all the hard work for us – and unfortunately, for reasons only God knows – She has left the hard work of recalculating to us. Yes, that my friends, is why we are here today, that is what Yom Kippur is for.

So the bad news is that we do not yet have a divine GPS. There will be no voice from heaven telling you what you need to do to make things right in the year to come.

But the good news is: we have all the tools that make my GPS so valuable --- we are just going to have to do the recalculating ourselves, we call it *t'shuvah*.

As I understand it, what makes my GPS work, is that it is loaded with a good map and it is connected to an excellent source above that never loses sight of where I am and where I need to be.

Well, how fortunate are we, as we begin our own hard work of *t'shuvah* recalculating, for we too have been blessed with a very good map and a wonderful source above.

Now don't underestimate the importance of having a good map.

What *teshuvah* will mean to you, the direction you take, will very much depend on your map, on your particular view of the world. If I walk out of the shul and unfold a map of the US and you walk out and unfold a map of Canada – well only one of us is going to get where we want to go. And it seems to me that there are an awful lot of people who are using a very different map than mine. All those cars seem to be traveling one way – and I seem to be headed another. But before you turn around and join the crowd – let's give this a little thought as to which map might be the best map for you

For example, I gaze over at your map and I notice that many of you no longer have free choice on it. It's on mine, but it is nowhere to be found on many of your maps. Oh, I know, you insist that its there – but I can't find it. "I'd love to come to shul Rabbi but I just don't have the time." "I now my Stevey should be continuing his Jewish education after his Bar Mitzvah but his schedule is just so packed it just does not permit it." It has become very popular in contemporary America to believe that we are all the product of forces beyond our control. When a young man calmly shoots and kills 32 innocent people on his college campus as occurred last spring at Virginia Tech, we hear a litany of reasons. We learn all about his mental issues, the lack of proper security at the college, the absence of meaningful gun control in our country, a mental health system that dropped the ball – and don't get me wrong, these are all relevant and important factors. I have no problem holding the university accountable, the mental health system accountable, the gun lobby accountable, but is there absolutely no room to hold the young man accountable. At some point are we not more than the sum of the forces that influence us? Is your child stubborn, or selfish – well not his fault – nor yours – he is merely the product of personality traits that became hard wired probably in his infancy. Or now what is even more fashionable is to blame it on his genes. Genes are being touted by some, as the only reason for the crimes we commit or the sexual deviancies we embrace – as soon as we have the proper genetic maps we will understand why we do all the things we do – it is just a matter of time till we discover that little Stevey's problem was that he was born with the stubborn gene. In the religious world this same philosophy finds its expression in the popular belief that, "the devil made me do it..." What all of these approaches have in common is that they do not believe that we have choice in any meaningful sense. And if you believe that whatever you do, you do for reasons beyond your control, than you are reading from a map that is very different than mine and you will have a very different view of *teshuvah* from those of us who believe we are able to make real choices in life.

Rabbi, are you suggesting that mental illness had nothing to do with those acts of violence at Virginia Tech? The problem here – like in so many areas of contemporary thought, is that there is so little room for gray. Everything is black and white, either/or. We go to our tax attorney and we ask: "So nu, am I in trouble or not?" And he says, "Well, it's not so simple." We sit before our doctor and we ask, "so nu, is it good news or bad? Will I live or die?" And she responds, "Well, it's not so simple." We want our truths simple. The bible is either literally true, or it is false, global warming – true or false, if the Palestinians are right than the Jews must be wrong – and either we have free will or we don't – either Seung-Hui Cho was at fault or the University was. And since we don't want to blame a troubled young man, and we don't want to blame ourselves for the bad things we do and since it is either us or them – it must be them: the devil made me do it.

Yes, I think that *teshuvah* is difficult for many of us because we have been raised in this either/or framework, we have been carefully taught to experience the world in the starkness of black or white.

And Judaism just does not know from such a world of either/or. Look at how the creation of humankind is presented in our sacred Bible. If you look at the earliest description of human nature as recorded in our Bible you will find a fascinating view of who we are and how we function. In Gen. 1:26 we are told most explicitly that we are created *b'tzelem elohim* – in the Divine Image. But the Bible quickly realizes that the divine *Tzelem* was not an adequate description of the human condition. It does not take much human experience to notice that people do unspeakable things that are in no way shape or form in keeping with any notion of

humans as divine. The very first human child Cain – murders his brother Abel. Sodom and Gomorrah and the depravity these cities represent are part of our earliest memories. It does not take much maturity to know that we humans have a tendency to get carried away and do all kinds of things that are not so divine.

So, the bible in its wisdom presents us with shades of gray and adds in Gen 2:7: “And *Adonai* our God molded the human of dust from the soil, He blew into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human being became a living being.” (Gen 2:7)

Here we humans are described as dust of the earth. Yes, we have a *neshama* – a divine breath that is breathed into us by the Living God – but it is breathed into a human, earthly body – one that is marked by pulsating and throbbing feelings of all sorts, pleasant and painful.

From the earliest pages of our bible we are taught that human nature is not either/or but both, a mixing of the divine and the animal, the dust of the earth and the heavenly spirit.

Now this is a tough sell in our black and white world. For those of us who have been raised to think in either/or terms, we have taught from a very young age to view ourselves as a singular self. We are either good or bad and so since no one wants to see himself as bad, then good is who we are, the bad is merely a flaw, an aberration, a defect in our otherwise good self. Listen to how we speak: “It wasn’t like me to do that.” “Having an affair was just not her!” “If only you knew the true me.” “I just wasn’t myself when I hit her, I love her!”

Many a career has been ruined at the office Christmas party where the normally circumspect employee, always the model of discretion - has a little too much to drink and says and does things to those to whom he should not say them or do them to. On Monday he tries to apologize saying - that was not how I *really* felt, that is not who I *really* am! Mel Gibson utters horribly anti-Semitic comments, but wants us to believe that was not him, it was the booze speaking – and then checks himself into the Betty Ford Clinic. Michael Richards, aka Kramer of Seinfeld fame unloosed a rant that unfortunately for him was caught on video and shared with the world but he then appears on the David Letterman Show to assure us that was not him. Even poor O.J. insists that he is a good guy who is just misunderstood.

All of these reflect a concept that is deeply embedded in our psyches – that we are one way, even though at times we act in other ways. In this conceptualization, the goal of *teshuvah* would be to conquer, transform, or eliminate the non-self parts of us – so the real self can be itself. So we check ourselves into rehab or undergo anger management in the hope that if we can conquer these bad traits our natural good traits will triumph.

But, my friends, Judaism has a very different approach, a very different map of human nature. The bad and the good, the animal and the divine – they are both part of what makes us human. The bad in me is not other, it is not alien – it is me.

Rabbi Larry Kushner in his inimitable style captures this beautifully when he states: “We go down into ourselves with a flashlight, looking for the evil we have intended or done – not to excise it as in some alien growth, but rather to discover the holy spark within it. We begin not by rejecting the evil, but by acknowledging it as something we meant to do. This is the only way we can truly raise and redeem it.

We loose our temper because we want things to be better right away.

We gaze with lustful eyes because we have forgotten how to love the ones we want to love. We hoard material possessions because we imagine they will help us to live more fully.

We even tolerate a society that murders, because we are convinced it is the best way to save more life.

At the bottom of all these behaviors is something that was once holy...this does not mean we are now proud of who we were or what we did, but it does mean that we have taken what we did back into ourselves, acknowledged it as part of ourselves...We no longer try to reject who we have been and therefore who we are. We do not simply repudiate the evil we have done and sincerely mean to never do it again; that is the easy part. No, as Jews, we receive whatever evils we have intended and done, back into ourselves as our own deliberate creations. We cherish them as long-banished children finally taken home again, and thereby transform them and ourselves.”

I take full responsibility for the things I do. I understand that there are many factors that influence me – my genes, my upbringing, my society – but ultimately I am responsible for the choices I make. All those extenuating circumstances will, I hope be taken into consideration at sentencing – but for now I stand guilty before the Judge and acknowledge my role in the choices I have made.

Yom Kippur calls on us to stand up and say: *al heyt shechatanu lefanecha* -- for the sin we have committed before You.... Not my genes, not my parents, not my schedule, -- me, I did it, it was my choice.

I find this to be an incredibly healthy and life affirming view of human nature. We Jews are blessed with a wonderful life map, it is called torah – it is even more amazing than my GPS. It has helped us find our way for thousands of years. *Eytz Hayyim Hi L'mahazikim bo* -- It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it... And, as long as you continue to hold fast to it, to embrace it and make sure it remains connected to the Source above, I believe the torah can direct you to where you need to go.

Oh, and I almost forgot to tell you about my favorite feature on my GPS – the “Go Home” button. I have this one button that is set to my home address – and no matter where I am, no matter how lost I may become, no matter how far I may have wandered, all I have to do is press that one button and it will plot a course back home. I love that button most of all. How wonderful and reassuring it is for me to know – that no matter what, I can always find my way home.

My friends, this is Yom Kippur – it is time to pause and recalculate. Learning to navigate the subtle shades of gray that make up life is no easy task. The work of *t'shuvah* is difficult and challenging – but don't worry we have all day to do it – and if you need more time – we have the whole year that follows. And all those cars headed in the other direction, pay them no heed. You have a wonderful map, you are connected to the Source above – and you have this place. We are your “Go Home” button. No matter how lost you may have become, no matter how far you may have wandered, -- all you have to do is come here, and we will help you find your way home – all you have to do is come here – and you will be home.