

From the Rabbi's Desk

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D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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Recalculating

As nerdy rabbinical students in our early and mid-twenties we searched for, or created, biblical jokes to amuse ourselves (believe me, we didn't amuse anybody else).



One of these jokes argued that the Children of Israel wandered in the desert for forty years because Moses, being a man, wouldn't ask for directions.

I admit that I am not very good at asking for directions. I guess I owe it to the fact that I grew up in a country where men are supposed to find their way on their own, and where asking for help is seen as a sign of weakness. I remember driving with Silvia and getting lost, and Silvia, after patiently waiting for me to admit defeat, suggesting that "we" ask for directions (the collective "we" was supposed to assuage my ego).

But of course this was a few years ago because now we don't have to ask for directions anymore. Now we have the handy GPS built into our phones.

Our phone is a very "smart phone." We use it as a GPS, as a calculator, as a compass, as a prayer book, to help us find kosher restaurants, and also to help us not to talk to each other, but this may be a subject for another dvar Torah.

Our GPS also likes to talk. *"Starting route to Long Island Jewish Medical Center. Head Northeast on Union Turnpike. In 4.3 miles take a sharp turn onto 264th Street."*

Silvia and I are very obedient and we usually do exactly what our GPS tells us to do. Sometimes, nonetheless, we believe we know better than the little lady inside the phone, or we get tired of following directions and decide to take a different route. The little lady inside the phone doesn't take it personally. With the simple declaration, "recalculating," she finds a new way to get us back on track.



"Recalculating. Starting route to Long Island Jewish Medical center. Head Northeast on Union Turnpike"

When I lose my way, sometimes I listen to the "recalculating" voice and do what she tells me. Sometimes I ignore the voice and do whatever I want, and other times I just turn off the GPS so as not to listen to the voice any longer.

What about you? Assuming that you use your GPS, at least occasionally, do you find its recalculating feature helpful or annoying? Or does it depend on how lost, or stubborn you are?

I wanted to explore this concept of "recalculating" a little further and googled it. (What else?) The first hit was from the Urban Dictionary. *Recalculating: A polite way of saying "you screwed up, idiot, try it again."*

Now I don't know what your opinion of a navigation system is, but I hope you admit it is a great invention. If I could define what a navigation system does, I would say that first it tells you where you are, and then when you tell the navigation system where you want to go, it finds the best way for you to get there.

Now, what would it look like to have a life navigation system? How would it look to really find out where we are in life, not physically, but spiritually? What would it be like to really know where we want to go, not tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but in the long run? What would it look like to explore what do we have to do to live a better life, a healthier life, a more meaningful life? And finally, what would it take to make it from point A to point B, from where we are now to where we ought to be tomorrow?

Wouldn't it be great to have an app with a little lady or man inside, to help us in our spiritual journey, to tell us what to do at each step?

But then again, I am afraid such an app doesn't exist. As Dr. Seuss summarizes it in one of my favorite books, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*:

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.

Some windows are lighted. But mostly they are darked.

A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!

Do you dare stay out? Do you dare go in?

How much can you lose? How much can you win?

And IF you go in, should you turn left or right...

or right-and-three-quarters? Or, maybe not quite?ⁱⁱ

Now, although there is no app or navigation system available to find our place in life, I like to suggest that we can be transformed by working on answering the same three questions a Navigation System does.

- Where are we now?
- Where we want to be?
- How are we going to get there?

"Where are you?" is the question God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden and, as Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi taught, the question is addressed to each "adam," to

each human being, wherever he or she is.ⁱⁱⁱ Where are you, Manes, in your life? Give me your “global position.” When you look at yourself in the mirror, what do you see? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are the fears that prevent you from growing, from being a healthier, happier, more insightful human being? The Ancient Greek aphorism “know thyself” is still relevant today. If the GPS feature of your smartphone wasn’t set up, it will ask your permission to access your location, since if you don’t know where you are, no navigation system will be able to help you.

While you ponder the first question, let’s turn our attention, briefly to the second one. Where do we want to be?

Rabbi Lisa Gelber started our last Selichot program with the following question: “How do you want to be next year?” Maybe “How do you want to be next year” is an easier alternative to our question, “Where you want to be next year?”

“I want to be more tolerant,” “more compassionate,” “at peace with the world,” were a few of the insightful answers we heard ten days ago.

However, if the questions “Where do you want to be next year?” or “How do you want to be next year?” are still difficult for you, try these: “Where do you not want to be next year” or “How do you not want to be next year.” Even people who don’t know what they *do* want know pretty well what they do *not* want. “I don’t want to live in fear,” “I don’t want to be stressed out,” “I don’t want to be tired all the time,” were also among the answers given to Rabbi Gelber’s question two Saturdays ago.

And finally, what would it take for me to move from point A to point B? In other words, what would it take for me, after I enter the data in this life GPS, to get to move from where I am now, to where my soul wants to be. (I said “where my soul wants to be” because I know my body wishes to be sitting under a palm tree on a Caribbean Island sipping a margarita. However, while the idea of sitting under a palm tree on a Caribbean Island sipping a margarita is very tempting and I may consider it, I know, at the end of the day, it won’t provide answers to the above life questions.)

Tomorrow I will continue addressing these questions, from a different angle. There is, however, one more point I would like to make, and it has to do with the concept of “recalculating.”

The “recalculating” feature of a GPS not only finds a new way for you to make it from point A to point B, but it does it from wherever you happen to be.

When I go astray, when I get lost, the little lady inside my phone doesn’t get angry, or frustrated, she doesn’t raise her voice or wag her finger. She doesn’t even tell me: “I told you so!” Gently, as she did last year and the year before, the little voice says the same word: *Recalculating*. Wherever you are, Manes, you can make it. Regardless of what circumstances led you on the wrong path, there is always a way back.

“Recalculating” is not about starting all over again. It is about knowing where you are right now and starting anew to head in the direction in which you ought to go. It is also about not being too harsh on yourself for having chosen the wrong path.

The point of recalculating is knowing that you do get to keep going! There is a lot of humility involved in accepting your mistakes, but also in knowing that maybe you saw something more and gained something from your “wrong turn”- maybe you got a prettier view, or you went into a bad neighborhood and learned to never go down that way again.

Perhaps, unlike the GPS, we don’t necessarily need to have a unique and set destination in mind. We can have measurable goals, a general direction - “this year I will move one step closer to the job I want,” “this year I will work on finding myself in a relationship,” “this year I will be more curious, more open minded.”

The recalculating feature of our GPS reminds us that, no matter where we end up, there is always a way to recalculate and end up in a place that will hopefully lead us closer to where we want to be, because there is always a way to turn back.

Recalculating. What a wonderful gift of love, patience and forgiveness! What are the High Holy Days if not a “recalculating” moment! These Holy Days present us with a

wonderful opportunity. Let's take advantage of them. Let's remember that the recalculating feature is always available.

May Hashem bless all of us with the resolution to ask life's important questions and with the courage to recognize that we don't have to stay on the same path if it is leading us nowhere. May Hashem bless us with the humility to accept a "recalculated" route and with the determination to start walking it.

May all of us and our loved ones be blessed with a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Recalculating>

ⁱⁱ Dr. Seuss: *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* Random House 1991.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the rav [Rabbi] of Northern White Russia (died 1813), was put in jail in Petersburg, because the mitnagdim [adversaries of Hasidim] had denounced his principles and his way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the rav, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the chief, a thoughtful person, what manner of man he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally he asked: "How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: 'Where art thou?'" "Do you believe," answered the rav, "that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation and every man is included in them?" "I believe this," said the other. "Well then," said the zaddik, "in every era, God calls to every man: Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?" God says something like this: "You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?" When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rav's shoulder, and cried: "Bravo!" But his heart trembled. (Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, pp. 9-10.)