

From the Rabbi's Desk
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The Wisdom of Not Knowing. Discovering a Life of Wonder by Embracing Uncertainty.

D'var Torah for the Second Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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The way we travel has really changed over the years. Looking back, our ancestors started out by traveling by horse-and-buggy! Look how far we've come since then. We can fly around the world, and we have so much technology to travel with.!

Dave Briggs, a blogger who lives in Athens and writes about his travel experiences, has shared thousands of travel tips, travel blog posts, and destination guides since 2005.

One of Dave's most interesting blogs is about "20 Ways that Travel has Changed in the Last 20 Years."

Here are a few of Dave's observations (I cut and pasted to give you the highlights, but his entire blogⁱⁱ is worth reading). A warning: if you are 25 years of age or younger you may not know what he is talking about.

Let's start by thinking about how we research where to go nowadays. Do you find yourself visiting your local library, and taking out a bunch of books on the destinations you want to visit? The answer, is probably not. So, we all know today that we have probably researched a trip online, and that we also book it online. 20 years ago though, things were very different. You would almost always make a booking for flights through a travel agency. Booking hotels was also very different 20

years ago. Today, if you need to book a hotel for a trip, you can choose from any number of websites in order to make the reservation online.

Do you remember the days when you could simply flag down a taxi? While companies such as Uber receive mixed reviews, there is no denying it is a great thing for travelers. You know in advance what a fare will be, and have a driver that is registered. ⁱⁱⁱ

And this brings me to Dave's last point in his blog: maps versus navigation apps. In the last five years, an increasing number of people are using their smartphones for navigation when they travel. I must confess that I am a nostalgic person. I am attracted by the past, and struggle to let go of the known and the familiar.

I remember how I used to get ready to hit the road for short trips and certainly for long ones. My family sat around the kitchen table, unfolded a map, took a marker, marked the route we were planning to take, and then studied the map, because there was no way we could actually unfold the map and check it while we were driving. If we got lost, we stopped at a gas station and asked for directions. There was no way to know if a traffic jam was ahead of us, and choosing the "right" road was purely a matter of luck.

When you used a map, you not only knew the "where to" of the trip but also the "how to" as well. The entire itinerary was marked on the folded map and memorized in your head.

However, Waze, a GPS navigation software that works on your phone, has completely transformed the way I travel. It is a map that shows up on my phone; I can input my destination, and it will show me the most effective way to get there: Don't take this road, there's a traffic jam. Don't take that road, there was an accident on this highway. Even though I know how to drive to the City, I use Waze to figure out the fastest way to get there.

When you use Waze, especially when you rely on the app's verbal instructions, all you know is one step at a time. "In a quarter of a mile turn left," "In 200 feet stay to the right."

Personally I feel the need to know more than one step at a time, so many times I look at my phone as well to make sure I am still going the right way. However, many

times depending on the traffic, it is difficult –and irresponsible! - to drive while looking at the phone. If I travel with Silvia or with one of the children, I ask them to give me three or four steps ahead, but if I travel alone, I need to deal with the anxiety of moving one step at a time, knowing that I will make it to my destination, but not knowing exactly how.

Life is pretty much like traveling with Waze.

While we wish life looked like a very well-marked itinerary, it actually resembles a journey where we make tiny steps, one at a time.

In our own heads, we have a plan: where to go and how to get there. However, life travelers know too well, that there are many stops, detours, blocked roads, and in many cases, complete changes of itinerary.

In this morning's Torah reading, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham begins to comply, when a messenger from God interrupts him. Abraham then sees a ram, and sacrifices it instead. In the middle of the story we find the following dialogue (Genesis 22:6-8):

⁶Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the fire and the knife; and the two walked off together.⁷ Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the fire and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"⁸ And Abraham said, "God will provide the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

They trusted that God would be their Waze guide. Abraham and Isaac only knew a bit of the way, and they trusted God to be the passenger seat navigator, and trusted that He would know what the destination held. God told Abraham: "Wake up. Take the firewood. Take your son. Go up the mountain."

And at the end of the day, their absolute trust in God led them to a destination, and thank God (get it?) it led them to a positive outcome, no one died - and in this case, that's not a figure of speech.

But we are not so lucky as to having God saying directly in our ears: turn this way, go to college. Go straight for four years, make a left turn on career. Buy your own apartment, U-Turn, a parent got sick, move back home. Save for retirement but wait - there's a traffic jam - economic recession on the way.

I don't like this uncertainty! No one likes this uncertainty. How am I supposed to go through life not knowing if I am going the right way or if there is an avoidable accident halfway through my trip? I need to know more than just the few baby steps I can see ahead of me.

Our Sages teach us (Niddah 30a) that not-knowing is built into our human DNA. According to the Talmud, the child in the womb is taught the entire Torah, but when it is time to be born, an angel comes and strikes him/her on the mouth, causing the child to forget what he/she has learned.^{iv}

Estelle Frankel, in her book: The Wisdom of Not Knowing. Discovering a Life of Wonder by Embracing Uncertainty, goes a step further, suggesting that the unknown can be a source of paralyzing fear and uncertainty, but also a starting point for adventure, creativity, and transformation. How we relate to the unknown is a key element in all personal growth and healing.

The only thing that is certain in our life's journey is uncertainty itself.

Granted, uncertainty, not knowing, can be very frightening and paralyzing. However, it can also be a source of renewed faith: faith in our own emotional resources, faith in our intuition in our experience, faith in our life journey's companions, and faith in God, the ultimate life navigation system.

Maybe all we need is to let go,^v to do our part, to try our best, and to trust that things will work out well at the end, even if we don't have the full itinerary of our life's journey in front of us.

"Rabbi, it is easier said than done," you will tell me. And you are right. But I am working on it. If uncertainty is built into my human DNA, I believe it is time for me to embrace it. If I can get past the initial fear, I trust the reward will be a happier and more peaceful life, for me, and for those around me.

And so I pray:

Dear God, Master of the revealed and the unknown. Here I stand, fearful and trembling, ready to embrace uncertainty and to let go. Help me overcome my anxiety and my need to control what I cannot control. Open my eyes to the beauty and the mystery of the road less traveled, and help me find Your assuring presence along the way.

May this be for us, for our loved ones, for the People Israel and for all human beings, a year of trust, a year of joy, a year of peace, a good and sweet year. Amen.

ⁱ <https://blog.travefy.com/2013/05/how-has-travel-changed-over-the-years/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.davestravelpages.com/20-ways-travel-changed.html/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibidem

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud Nidah 30b. *There is no time in which a man enjoys greater happiness than in those days, as it is said, "O that I were as in months gone by, in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone over my head, when I walked in the dark by its light" (Job 29:2,3) . . . [these are] the months of pregnancy. It (the embryo) is also taught the entire Torah . . . and it says "God's company graced my tent." (Job 29:4) As soon as it (the embryo) sees the light, an angel comes and slaps it on the mouth and it forgets the entire Torah.*

^v The song "Better Than I" comes to my mind as I write these words.

*I thought I did what's right
I thought I had the answers
I thought I chose the surest road
But that road brought me here*

*So I put up a fight
And told you how to help me
Now just when I have given up
The truth is coming clear*

*You know better than I
You know the way
I've let go the need to know why
For you know better than I*

*If this has been a test
I cannot see the reason
But maybe knowing I don't know
Is part of getting through*

*I try to do what's best
And faith has made it easy
To see the best thing I can do
Is put my trust in you*

*You know better than I
You know the way
I've let go the need to know why
For you know better than I*

John Bucchino: Better Than I. David Campbell Sings John Bucchino' Released in June 2014.