

Kol Nidre - 5782
Temple Sinai - Dresher, PA
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“Recalculating”: The Detour That Brings Us Closer to God

Let’s pretend to go on a road trip together. First, I just need to check on a few things before we leave. Whenever I leave home, I always check my pockets to make sure I have my keys, wallet, phone... and don’t forget to bring a mask. Ok, what else do we need? Snacks! No road trip is complete without some great snacks. Oh wait, tonight is Yom Kippur, better we forget this step and keep moving along.

Great, so we are in the car now. And before we hit the road, I just need to set up the GPS with our destination. Ok, Waze just said, “All set, let’s go!” I don’t mind driving, feel free to make yourself comfortable and unlike the sanctuary our car has dual climate control so you can make sure the air conditioner is to your liking.

Yallah, let’s get this road trip started.

After driving for an hour or so, the GPS announces, take the next exit in 2 miles. We get into the right lane.... And oh no. I missed the exit. I can’t believe I missed the turn. And now we both look over at the GPS, and see that dreaded word, “Recalculating... Recalculating.”

You all know this experience I just described. Even if we are the most attentive drivers, we miss the turn, we miss that exit from time to time. Hearing the GPS announce, “recalculating, recalculating” is one of my biggest pet peeves. Why? I don’t like the feeling of being lost. I am the type of person who plans ahead. I like keeping to the original plan.

Whenever I am exploring a new city or a new country, I feel invincible when I use the GPS on my phone. GPS allows me to navigate the streets like a local, always knowing which way to turn. Getting lost does not sound like an enjoyable way to spend a vacation. But if you are like me, it is not just when I am on vacation that I use GPS to guide me to my destination. I use GPS everywhere I go with the exception of driving to the grocery store.

And why not? GPS takes the guesswork out of driving. When I use GPS, I feel as though I am in trusted hands. That somebody is looking out for me. Gone are the days of printing out directions from Mapquest before leaving home, or going to AAA to pick up a TripTik. Now there is no need to study a map in advance, all you need to do is simply enter a destination on your phone and off you go.

I know that missing a turn does not sound like that big of a deal, but when I see the GPS recalculate and display the new route, I feel dismayed. The new ETA with its additional 5 or 10 minutes is a reminder of my mistake. GPS is there to help us find the fastest route to our destination, and now we are stuck driving several more unnecessary miles in the wrong direction. While GPS is a powerful tool, there is still room for human error. We all make mistakes. We all miss the turn. Thankfully, GPS can account for our mistakes. As annoying as it may be to hear “recalculating, recalculating” it is a reminder to us to recognize our mistake and to make a change in the direction we are heading. To find a new way to turn when we have gone “off the derech,” off of our intended path.

None of us are perfect. There is no need to get upset when we have missed the mark. In fact, no road trip is ever perfect... at least not the memorable ones. Think back to your last road trip. Do you remember the experience of driving when everything was going according to plan? Probably not. When sharing memories of your last trip, you most likely talked about when the car almost ran out of gas and you ended up exploring a new town a few miles off the highway in search of a gas station, or when you missed that turn but you enjoyed the scenic view that you would have otherwise missed if you had stayed on the main road. It is the unintentional experiences that take us on a different road that are often the most memorable.

During this season, we are called upon to do Teshuvah, to repent for our sins. Recognizing that which we have done wrong is not easy. Through Teshuvah, we turn in a new direction, we find a new path to take instead of remaining on the road of our errors. Teshuvah literally means “to turn.” When we engage in repentance, when we engage in Teshuvah, we turn, and when we turn often we take an accidental detour that elongates our journey. We have to go farther in order to get closer to where we need to go.

In other words, making the wrong turn, and then recalculating to a longer route actually brings us closer to God.

What do I mean by this? Let me begin by sharing a story.

The longest road trip I have ever taken was a cross country drive from Los Angeles to New Jersey. I was only 4 and ½ years old. This was not a family vacation in the minivan. Instead, this was the ultimate father-son road trip. Our family was moving from California to New Jersey, and while my Mom flew across the country with my sister and brother, my Dad and I had the journey of a lifetime. We drove a 24 ft long moving truck with the family minivan attached on a trailer. As a 4 and ½ year old, I was not so helpful with the driving, but from my booster seat, I was our GPS, pointing out the signs for the next rest stop and keeping my Dad focused on the road ahead.

The key to driving such a big truck as amateur “truckers” was to never drive in reverse. And for eight days, we made our way across the country, never going off course, never needing to recalculate and find a new path. On the 8th Day, after driving 2800 miles we were only 50 miles from our final destination. Dad took the wrong exit, and thought he could find a way back to the highway, but the road he tried became narrower and we eventually reached a train overpass which we were unable to drive under with our truck. My dad tried to turn around, but jackknifed, leaving our truck stuck on this road.

What were we to do? At that very moment, out of nowhere, a man driving a pickup truck stopped behind our truck. The bearded man asked my dad if he needed any help. My dad said, “Any chance you are a professional truck driver?” And to my dad’s surprise, the man said, “Yes!” The man jumped into the cab of the truck, quickly said hello to me sitting in the passenger seat and within a few minutes, he had successfully performed a K-turn, turning our truck and the trailer back into the right direction. Before my Dad had the chance to thank the man for saving us, this mysterious man and his pickup truck had vanished. In the following months, as we retold this story to others, it was the Rabbi of our synagogue, Rabbi Albert Lewis

who responded, “you know that mysterious man was not a random person, he was Eliyahu HaNavi, he was Elijah the Prophet!”

Perhaps, the Rabbi was correct. The very figure we sing about at the conclusion of each Shabbat and who visits our seder tables each Passover for a quick drink, Elijah had traded in his chariot of fire for a Ford F-150.

My dad and I will never know who this mysterious man that saved us really was, but it definitely felt that God was there with us when we needed help, turning our truck back in the right direction. It took us 2800 miles and one wrong turn to bring God or at least “Elijah,” closer to us.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Abbahu teaches

מְקוֹם שְׁבַעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִין — צְדִיקִים גְּמוּרִים אֵינָם עוֹמְדִין

"In the place where Baalei Teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand." In this context, a Ba'al Teshuvah, is a person who has gone through the complete process of Teshuvah, of repenting for one's sins and who vows not to repeat such actions in the future. At first this teaching seems backwards. Rabbi Abbahu is arguing that one who has done wrong and has now done complete Teshuvah is more desirable to God than a person who never sinned at all in the first place. How can this be?

When we engage in Teshuvah, we don't simply say sorry and move on. We learn from our sins. We have to constantly remind ourselves not to repeat the same hurtful actions. It is hard work, and recognizes our effort.

Yes, when we make a wrong turn and we recalculate to take a longer route, a path that seems to take us away from our original destination, it is this experience of taking the longer, unplanned road that actually brings us closer to our destination.

There is a story of the 18th Century Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak saw a known sinner and grabbed the sinner by the lapels. In front of all of the onlookers, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak said, "I am jealous of you!" Even the sinner was shocked by the rabbi's declaration. Seeing the astonishment on the face of the sinner, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak loosened his grip and explained: "Once you repent, all your crimes will be considered virtues and then your merits will be innumerable"

So is sinning the shortcut for looking favorable before God? The answer is no. Sinning, making a wrong turn, should not be the way we set out in life. Yet, if we do make a wrong turn, luckily God has a way for us to get back on track.

My teacher, Rabba Yaffa Epstein writes, "Human beings are imperfect and make mistakes, and yet, their forgiveness is also inherent to the Human experience. While God understands our humanity, we must still acknowledge our mistakes, and stand in judgement. Yet, that process holds within it a guarantee for compassion and forgiveness on the part of the Divine."

She explains that it only took one hour for Adam to transgress God's commands when Adam was first brought into the Garden of Eden. From this, Rabba Epstein teaches, "inherent in the creation of the Human being is the capacity for making mistakes. Unlike the angels of the Divine court, we were never supposed to be perfect; we were always going to be flawed."

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Teshuvah means that from every mistake, I grow. There is no failure I experience that does not make me a deeper human being; no challenge I accept, however much I fall short, that does not develop in me strengths I would not otherwise have had. That is the first transformation of Yom Kippur: a renewed relationship with myself."

Both Rabba Epstein and Rabbi Sacks remind us that making mistakes is part of the human experience. No human is perfect. It is precisely from our moments of failure that we learn to grow. We turn, we engage in Teshuvah. And while the process of Teshuvah, of recalculating,

is longer than if we had just done what was right from the start, it is from this journey that we grow and become better versions of ourselves.

We are descendants of the wanderers. Instead of taking the most direct path from Egypt to the Land of Israel, the Israelites wander through the wilderness for 40 years. The Israelites were slow to embrace their new freedom. While waiting for Moses to return from Mount Sinai, they sin by reverting back to the way of life they knew in Egypt, as they created a Golden Calf to worship. Upon seeing the Golden Calf, Moses drops the original tablets of the 10 Commandments. This could have been the end of the journey for the Israelites. But they learned from this experience, and God gave them a second chance, as Yom Kippur marks the very day when Moses descended Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets. Yom Kippur is a day for second chances, an opportunity for us to grow from our prior errors.

We are not perfect, but we have been given the gift of the ability to “recalculate” to recognize what we have done wrong and to change the direction we are heading. Tonight, on Yom Kippur, we pledge that we will do our very best in the new year ahead, but it is a reality that we will also stand here, next Yom Kippur, to engage in Teshuvah, to grow and learn from new things that we will do wrong.

The need to “recalculate,” the ability to pivot and change direction has become a necessary skill over the past 18 months of the pandemic. Will this new year be perfect? No. But we will continue to pivot, and make the best of the year ahead.

Like many of you, through no fault of our own, there has been great stress for anyone who has been planning a simcha, a joyous occasion, during the pandemic. Amanda and I have our dream of what our wedding in April will look like, but we both know in the back of our minds that there is a reality that we may have to pivot. While I am still hopeful that we will be able to have the wedding of our dreams, of course we have discussed ways in which we may need to “recalculate” to turn in a different direction. But if there is anything I have learned from this process of planning for the detours that may lie ahead, it does not matter what will be in April, as long as Amanda and I have found a route that brings us together under the Chuppah.

The need to “recalculate,” to find a different path forward has taught us all what is really important in life. Changing the direction of the road we are already on is never easy, but like a road trip... life is more memorable when we find ourselves on the road that we had not originally intended.

So what do you say, let’s take a road trip together. Don’t forget your keys, phone, wallet and mask. But before we head out, please give me a moment to plug in the GPS. I am a good driver, but if I miss a turn or an exit, please do not get too upset. It happens. And when the GPS says “recalculating, recalculating,” do not fear or get annoyed. We will turn to follow this new path. It may take us a little more time, but who knows what we will find or what we will learn about ourselves on this new road ahead of us. Who knows, maybe, just maybe we will even meet Elijah the Truck driver or feel closer to God after this unintentionally longer journey. But there is one thing I promise you, we will make it to our destination, even if it takes a few extra miles to get there.

So... are you in? I am free these next 24 hours. How about you? Well, let’s get started. Setting waze for our destination, the Book of Life. Now, sit back, relax and enjoy the ride.

G'mar Chatima Tova.

May we all be inscribed this year in the Book of Life.