

Interpreting the Map of Our Lives

High Holy Days 5769

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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

I. Where Are We?

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Shana tovah. Erev tov. Sixteen years ago, to the month if not to the actual day, I was a rabbinic student, living in Los Angeles, and working on my doctorate at the University of Southern California. For those of you who can remember back to the early nineties, that was the election year when, the then President, George Herbert Walker Bush, was running for reelection against Governor William Jefferson Clinton of Arkansas. That year, Health Care was one of the high profile issues in the election. I was writing a paper on the Health Care proposals being put forth by each of the candidates. To do my research, remember, not everything was on the web in 1992, I visited the campaign headquarters for each party.

On a rainy evening in October, I drove in to some L.A. neighborhood in which I had never been before and probably never since, and spent a couple of hours with a staffer in the Republican Campaign office.

When I walked out, well after dark, I noticed that there was a limousine parked in front of the store next door, and a line of people extended out the door. Curiosity got the better of me and I walked in to what turned out to be a children's book store. But unlike other children's book stores I knew, this one had framed, signed prints from famous children's authors and artists. And the store was packed with people, dressed to the "9's", L.A. style.

Looking around, I noticed that the line wound through the store and into the back. As I followed it, I found a table loaded with cheese and crackers and wine. I figured nobody had kicked me out yet, I might as well help myself to a plate – before they did ask me to leave.

With my plate piled high, I wandered around, and said half out loud and half to the person standing next to me: "What is everybody standing in line for?" I heard a woman's voice respond: "Some lady wrote a children's book." Before I realized that the voice came from behind me and that I recognized it, I blurted out: "Is it any good?" And then to my great embarrassment, as my brain caught up to the rest of me, Whoopi Goldberg, seated behind me, responded: "Well, not too bad for an actor turned children's author."

Whoops. Stunned, silent, I turned around. Sure enough, seated right behind me, was a laughing Whoopi Goldberg.

The *Midrash* teaches: דע לפני מי אתה עומד – Know before whom one is standing. The author of the *Midrash* probably did not have Whoopi Goldberg in mind, but it would have served me well to have had the teaching in mind!

The end of the story involves me buying a half dozen copies of her book as a form of כפרה – atonement, having them autographed, and then accompanying Whoopi for a slice of pie and a coffee up the street after the book signing ended – a very cool first date.

We start a New Year, we come together, and I want to know, "Do we really know where we are standing?" Are we aware of our surroundings? Could you describe your current place, your

location? I don't mean at Ohr Shalom, or even at Third and Laurel. Though I am glad that is where you are.

But deeply, seriously, soulfully, "Where are you?"

Where do we look when we want to know our location? We look to map. We will learn different things about our location depending on what map we look at: the road map tells us we are at Third & Laurel; the map of synagogues in San Diego tells us we are at Ohr Shalom; the tourist map tells us we are in an historic building, or we are a few blocks from Balboa Park or the ocean. Different maps, different answers.

But these are all simple location. Maps also orient me: which way am I facing? What is in front of me and what is behind? Is my map more than two dimensional? What is above or below? Before or after?

Still, these are all spatial, what about maps in other dimensions? Where am I in the map of my life? I am completing my fortieth year, my ninth as a husband, seventh as a parent, thirteenth as a rabbi.

Where is my soul? Where can I find myself on the map of joy? On the map of sorrow?

This year in particular, I am hyper-aware of the map of angst, of anxiety. I am aware that on this map, one out of ten homes in California is behind or defaulting on its mortgage, unemployment levels in the United States are reaching historic levels, we are embroiled in two wars around the globe, many of us are facing difficult situations and decisions regarding our own health, our aging parents, our children's future, finally, more so than any time in its sixty year history, Israel may be entering the shadow of nuclear threat.

The map of angst is a crowded one this year.

Did I mention that I love maps, even scary ones?

I love old maps. Maps that were drawn before the globe had been fully explored. Maps based on limited information and lots of mistakes. I love biased maps.

Have you seen the map of a New Yorker's view of the world? It is a stilted perspective drawing, in which most of the map of the United States is New York. All such drawings are based on a composition from a New York artist, Saul Steinberg. His "A View of the World from Ninth Avenue" graced the cover of the New Yorker in March of 1976 and the idea has been copied from East Coast to West Coast and around the globe. Shift the perspective and the map shifts to follow.

In creating the map, the cartographer injects bias. When you and I read the map, we are affected by that bias.

So, what are the maps that I use to locate myself and what are their biases? When I say הנהני – on which map do I locate that “Here I am?”

Gordon Livingston, in his wonderful little book *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart*, tells a story from his days as a young lieutenant. He writes:

Once, a long time ago, I was a young lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne Division, trying to orient myself on a field problem at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. As I stood studying a map, my platoon sergeant, a veteran of many junior officers, approached. “You figure out where we are, lieutenant?” he asked. “Well, the map says there should be a hill over there, but I don’t see it,” I replied. “Sir,” he said, **“if the map don’t agree with the ground, then the map is wrong.”**

This is deep wisdom, worth posting up on our bathroom mirrors to look at every night and every morning.

If the map don’t agree with the ground, then the map is wrong.

We can fight it. We can hide from it. But if our map – our understanding of this world and our place within it – does not agree with the ground, the facts, reality, we continue to locate ourselves and to navigate by the false map at great peril to ourselves and those around us.

There is a famous story in the Talmud about four sages who enter into the *Pardes*, a mystical garden, perhaps Paradise, heaven, itself. (Text number 3, page 1) Though they walk in the same place and tread the same path, they each carry a different map in their head, and therefore, each finds a different place at the end of the journey.

Ben Azzai, when faced with the disconnect between his map of understanding and the reality of where he was standing, loses his faith in the map and his faith in his ability to understand the place where he was standing. He rejects both his distorted image of reality and the truth of his surroundings, and not being able to live in either world, he dies.

Ben Zoma’s map is perfect in every way, or so he delusionally and in denial, believes. When he sees this mystical sight that does not comport to his map, he chooses the map, that is the constructed skewed reality in his head, over what he actually sees. He refuses to believe the ground in front of him, maintaining instead the map of understanding in his head. Therefore, he can no longer make sense of this world in any meaningful way. In choosing his map over his experience, he goes crazy.

Acher, Alisha ben Abuyah, makes a different choice. He rejects the map altogether. If his map, that is Judaism, or his faith in God, conflicts with evidence before him, Judaism and faith are flung aside. He becomes an apostate.

Only Rabbi Akiva **בשלום ויצא בשלום** enters in wholeness and exits in wholeness. That is, only Rabbi Akiva is able to maintain both his map and his ability to see the road as it truly appears to him.

What's so special about Rabbi Akiva? Why is he able to survive this disconnect?

The text tells us. If you look at the beginning, Rabbi Akiva tells the others that there will be a place of crisis in the *Pardes*. I don't understand the details, but the text makes clear that Rabbi Akiva does not have an unbridled expectation about his ability, or his companions abilities, to comprehend what they will see. He expects to see a conflict between his understanding and what he sees. He anticipates that the map will not match the facts on the ground.

He has a humility regarding both the reality he has constructed in his mind, his personal map, and the facts he sees on the ground. He expects to find places that do not fully line up with the map. He knows that his map is imperfect, but still has merit, is still viable. He does not choose the ground over the map, or the map over the ground, but rather maintains a relationship with both.

Akiva then is our paradigm. We must accept that the reality we have constructed in our heads, about our world, our lives, ourselves, is an imperfect representation of the world as it really is, but without this map, literally, we are lost.

If you will allow me to digress to a much less traditional source, for those of you who remember Christopher Guest from his Monty Python days, you may also remember him from his brilliant work in the rockumentary – “This is Spinal Tap.” This isn't the time or the place to recap the whole movie – though I do have to mention that our Capital Campaign Architects are still trying to figure out why we want the new sound system to go to eleven. If you missed the reference, do yourself a favor and after *Yontiff* rent the movie.

Back in the late eighties, Christopher Guest won the Harvard Lampoon's Man-of-the-Year award. In his acceptance speech, he had all of us laughing till our sides ached, talking about the fans of the band Spinal Tap. Not the fans of the movie, mind you, but the fans who refused to believe that Spinal Tap was a farce. The fans who were so committed to their view of the world and rock bands, that they still believe that the movie is a real “documentary” about a real band. We laughed as Christopher Guest told story after story of “life-time, die-hard” fans of a band that never really existed.

Michael Chabon's most recent book, called appropriately *Maps and Legends*, is a more recent and more erudite example of this phenomenon – both the book itself and the end of the book where he talks about the readers who confuse his fiction with non-fiction. Including the lady who explained to him that she visited Sitka, Alaska on a cruise and doesn't remember finding there a modern, entirely Jewish, city. For whatever reason, her map confused fiction for non-fiction and even though she saw within her own eyes to the contrary, her mind still maintained

the fantasy of her map over the reality of her sight – I chuckled as I read that Chabon decided not to disabuse her of her mistaken map.

Where are the maps in our heads so wrong, that people who can see more clearly chuckle? Who is it that knows as well enough to do for us what Chabon did not do for this fan of his, that is, to call us to task for our warped map, to demand that we reassess how we see the world, how we understand where we are standing.

So all of this talk about maps, the limitations of maps, the places where our maps fail to reflect our reality, now, where does that leave us as we begin a New Year and as we begin these Ten Awesome Days?

We must begin, each one of us, with our own maps, our own views or assumptions about this world, those around us and ourselves, that we carry in our heads, through which we see the world, understand our place, find our bearing.

Where are you? When you answer, “Here I am,” what does that mean? Where does that locate you? When you place yourself on your map does it comport well with the empirical reality, the ground on which you stand? Are there places of conflict, of disconnect, of incongruities between the map and the ground? What do you see when you focus in on those places on your map? And who can speak the truth to you, and help you to laugh at your mis-mapped map.

On the map of my world, I think I know where I stand.

I **think** I stand in the place marked good husband; and yet, there have been times when I have failed to hear the anxiety in my pregnant wife’s voice, failed to call when running late, failed to consider how my decisions affect her, failed. How must my map change? How much can I change the grounded reality?

I **think** I stand in the place marked good father; and yet, there have been times when I have failed to be where I should have been (back to school night, teaching to ride a bicycle or throw a ball, tucking in at night), times when I was self-absorbed and didn’t hear the snuffle for attention before it grew in to the scream. How must my map change? How much can I change the grounded reality?

I **think** I stand in the place of becoming a pretty good rabbi; and yet, I have failed this year to be with some of you when you needed me, or needed guidance. I have missed the wisdom you shared with me when it went over my head, or in one ear and out the other. How must my map change? How much can I change the grounded reality?

This then is our task for these Ten Days, for our time together. Instead of taking an accounting of our lives this year, we are going to reflect on our own personal maps and how they reflect

reality, and how they allow me to resist or avoid reality. This year, for these days instead of accountants, we are going to be cartographers.

So you have homework. You have texts to study, but more importantly pull out your maps, the maps in your head. If you have done this self-reflection recently, you know what they look like. If not, find them, no matter how deeply they are buried, dust them off, and pour over them.

In the coming days, please God, give us the strength, like Rabbi Akiva to stare honestly and sincerely into the world as it is, to compare it to our map as we imagine it, and emerge wiser, with insight into ourselves and as better, more righteous people. **כִּן יְהִי רְצוֹן**