

Interpreting the Map of Our Lives

High Holy Days 5769

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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

III. Where Are We Going?

Or

Planning by Committee

Second Morning of Rosh HaShanah

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Shana tovah. Boker tov. I love the second day of Rosh HaShanah. It is wonderful to be with those who choose to be here for the second day. I laugh every time I hear a story about a rabbi who yells at the people in *shul* about not coming to *shul*. In fact, while running with a friend the other day, I heard the story about a rabbi who does this not only at the holidays, but every *Shabbos*.

I feel completely the opposite. I get so excited that there are so many people who out of all the places in the world they could be this morning, are here. Of all the things that are important to us, being in *Shul*, being in our *Shul*, connecting to God, community, tradition, history and whatever else motivates us to be here is what we decide is the most important way to spend these hours. That is a beautiful and meaningful statement in a world with lots of wonderful distractions (remember we live in San Diego).

So the second day of Rosh HaShanah has me reflective in a different way than the first day. We have been talking about maps, finding where we are and how we got here. Hopefully your reflection on this *Yontiff* so far has you thinking about where you stand and about your story of how you got here.

In the context of looking backwards to see how we got here, I want to briefly admit that in the past year I have been spoiled with two new toys – both birthday presents.

First, this past year as a gift from my in-laws I received a new video game system – a Wii. I mention it not for any reason of importance, except to offer an open challenge to anyone who would like to study a little Torah and compete in Wii bowling or Wii tennis. I won't challenge anyone to boxing because Jennifer is the undisputed champion of our house. So you can challenge her.

The second new toy I got for my birthday this past year is a little portable GPS for my car. A GPS is a satellite based system that allows me to know exactly where I am with great precision. It also can keep a log of where I have been. Finally, it can give me directions to any address or spot in its memory.

As for the first two, it does an outstanding job. Thinking back to my remarks from *Erev Rosh HaShanah*, Monday night, it can be a wonderful tool to help me know where I am.

Remembering yesterday, it can also be an excellent resource to help me figure out how I got here.

As for its third function, that is a totally different matter. Don't misunderstand me, the directions it gives always work, but I often find that it is like scratching my nose this way (around back of head) – it works, but there has to be an easier, more direct route. Honestly, I find the same challenge with on-line directions like Google maps – they get me to where I want to be, but I would do better to ask somebody who knows the way.

This is our world today – we can navigate with great precision, but first we must select an intended destination and then figure out who or what website to trust to get us there.

Both of these are challenging questions – where do I want to go and how am I planning on getting there?

Where do I want to go is a variant of what do I want to be when I grow up. It is also a variant of “If I could change one thing in my life”

Both of these are examples of destination-based thinking. I want to be there, not here. This mode of thinking allows us to project a change without focusing on the map that will allow us to arrive there.

For example, we might think, “I wish I had a more interesting job,” or “a job that pays more.” I could also wish that “I could learn to control my anger,” “be more patient,” “spend more time with my family,” “lose ten pounds,” and so on.

Very few people fantasize about the future and look forward to the road to achieving these changes: “I wish I was giving up my free time to go back to school to learn a new trade,” “I wish I was in therapy or anger management classes,” “I wish I was on a diet.”

But both pieces are critical – we need to plan for a destination and a route for getting there. We need to decide what about our current location or situation we want to change, and then think strategically about how we are going to get there.

There are different models for this. The first, my favorite, at least in theory, is the faith-based model.

In this morning’s *Torah* reading, God says to Abraham, “Take your son and offer him to me as a sacrifice on one of the mountains I will show you,” and he goes without comment. In fact, this faith-based, trust in God for the destination and the directions to get us there, understanding of Abraham in the story of the binding of Isaac, gives us a simple reading of Abraham’s response when Isaac asks him where is the lamb for the offering. Abraham replies: “God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.” Abraham knows with complete faith that at the end of the day, God will decide the outcome – God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, whatever or whoever it turns out to be.

This is a model of how to decide where to go and also how to get there. It’s a religious version of throwing darts at a map – let the fates decide.

To most of us, this sounds silly, too fundamentalist, for a group as sophisticated as we are, but I think we dismiss this mode of thinking too quickly. How many of us have those parts of our lives that are on auto-pilot, that continue through a sense of inertia rather than any meaningful

willfulness? How many of us are in relationships, or haven't spoken to a loved one in a long time, or are comfortable in our job, or ignoring areas of our life screaming for change?

I think for at least some percentage of our life, we do coast on a sort-of of faith-based model of trusting the general direction of our life without stopping to seriously consider our desired destination or strategizing the best path to attempt to reach it.

Even when we do trust that the road has been laid out before us, sometimes we resist what we believe to be inevitable. I believe Abraham did the same thing.

There is a delicious little detail in the text when Abraham spies the mountain. Torah doesn't just tell us that Abraham saw the mountain on the third day. It says: וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו – Abraham lifted up his eyes. As if to say, he spent three days hiking, staring at the ground, as a rebellion, an act of resistance or an attempt at avoiding the end that he believes is before him.

So this is the faith based model for defining the destination and path before us, but there are other models.

I want to suggest, briefly, four others – the Lemming or Herd Model, the Different-To-Be-Different Model, the Essentialist Model and finally, the Values Based Model.

In short hand, they are the Popular, the Bohemian, the “I Am Me” and finally, the Rationalist system of planning the road ahead.

As for the Popular, if it was a Zamru Friday night, I would have Jennifer sing the wonderful song from the musical *Wicked* and that would be sufficient. It is easy to caricature and mock this, but there is no denying the Herd mentality we share as a species. We like fitting in.

For example: I never seriously considered doing a “gap” year after High School in Israel, because none of my friends were doing it – everybody went straight to college, I went straight to college. Crazy coincidence, many of my friends got married at around the same time.

Let's be careful, because we label this instinct to fit-in as being a bad system, we fail to recognize all the wonderful things in our lives that are based within community, and at some level, this herd instinct is what allows us to set aside portions of our individuality to be part of the herd.

The Different-To-Be-Different Model reflects the values of a counter-culture. I plan my journey in life based on seeing what others do and choosing differently. This methodology sees virtue in making decisions specifically because they are not the popular, or assumed, decisions.

This is most famously formulated in Robert Frost's poem – “The Road Not Taken.”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet, knowing how way leads onto way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood
And I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.

There is something very attractive to this model, choosing the less common road, daring to be different. But the limitation of this model is clear from the narrator of Frost's poem. The narrator within the poem decides which road to choose not based on anything inherent or intrinsic to the less traveled path, but purely because it was less traveled. Choosing the counter-culture specifically because it runs counter to popular culture.

The Essentialist Model believes that there is something unique about me. I am different. It is not different just to be different, but I am distinct from everybody else. This is the Jonathan Livingston Seagull model. I have my own rules, my own destiny. To quote from another Broadway musical, *Pippin*, "Rivers belong where they can ramble, eagles belong where they can fly, I've got to be where my spirit can run free, got to find my corner of the sky."

For those old enough to remember, this is a very seventies way of thinking, but it also attested to in our tradition. There is a wonderful *Mishnah* from *Masechet Sanhedrin* that talks about the uniqueness, even the critical essence of each human being.

In trying to understand why all humanity is created from a single progenitor, one of the answers given is: (Roman numeral eleven, on page six of the Text Handout)

In order to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be God. For if a human creates many coins from a single mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme Ruler of all Rulers, the Holy One, Blessed be God, stamps each human in the mold of the first human, and no two look alike. Therefore each and every person is obligated to say: for my sake was the world created.

Is it also at the core of the wonderful little *Chassidische* story of Rebbe Zusya crying on his death bed, not because he wasn't more like Moses in his lifetime, but because he wasn't more like Zusya.

Both of these texts from the tradition are predicated on a core understanding of the unique nature of each and every human being – the essentialist argument that I am I, uniquely so, and I must be who I am. Jonathan Livingston Seagull in *payos* and a *shtreimel*.

And finally, the Rationalist Model. I have no great stories from the tradition or lyrics from Broadway to quote. Suffice it to say, that one of the key understandings of what it means to be created in the Divine image, is the ability to think, and to think rationally.

For the past few centuries, the cornerstone of ethical thinking and decision making has been the mind of the enlightenment, the rationalist.

In this context, it is the Rationalist Model than can analyze the values present in my life, weigh the ethical and pragmatic merits of all of the hypothetical futures I can imagine, and analyze all of the strategies on how to map out a path to each desired destination.

It is tempting to call the Rationalist Mind the victor, the most desirable, and to continue with *musaf*, but that it is too easy. One of things we discover through this Rationalist mode of thinking is the deep merit in each of the other systems.

There are times when we deem it best to “boldly go” into a future we cannot see, towards an unknown destination.

For all of the bashing the image of Lemmings and the idea of Popular takes among we, the highly educated and free thinking, we must remember that we are a herd animal. We live at a time when we are starving for community, when we need to find a place to belong, to fit in. With the destruction of the fences that kept us in our herd for so long, we now live in a society where our communal soul has been torn apart, and we are wandering looking for our flock.

Having said that, sometimes the molds need to be broken, habits need to end, the idols need to be smashed. Sometimes different just to be different is important, even if different is no better. Sometimes we need to step out of the main flow of the river to see where we are and where we are going. Sometimes when everyone around us is screaming together, “We are one,” I need to be the voice that says, “Not me, I’m not.” And if it is not me, then sometimes it needs to be you.

And I do believe that there is something essential, special and unique in every human being. It is part of the miracle of our creation. This should be nurtured and developed. Jonathan Livingston Seagull needs the chance to spread his wings. We all need a space in which we can soar.

To draw our map into the future, to pick our destination and the waypoints through which we will pass, cannot be left to any one cartographer. The mapping of our future, of our lives, is a complicated process by a committee of cartographers – one marching with perfect faith, one trusting the herd, one desiring to be different just to be different, one trying to find the essence of who I am, and at least one who thinks rationally, analytically.

This last voice of my soul, the rationalist cartographer, needs to be the chair of the map making committee, and needs to be an excellent chair.

As I look ahead into the coming year, please God, as I look ahead to a long future for me, my family, and my community, I need the merits of each of these different modes of planning, and the ability to balance all of them.

I need the wisdom to be able to plot out a course in the service of that part of my soul that trusts that You will provide, that part that wants to be part of the group, that part that wants to leave the group, that part that once to find my inner essence, and that part that serves in the name of wisdom.

God bless me, bless us, and bless our leaders with the ability to learn from all of these competing voices and to plot a course towards a bright and hopeful tomorrow.

I will close with the charge towards a bright future and the places we will go, from Dr. Seuss:

Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You're off to Great Places!
You're off and away!

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
any direction you choose. . .

So . . .
be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O'Shea,
you're off to Great Places!
Today is your day!

Your mountain is waiting.
So . . . *get on your way!*