

Finding Our Way
Yom Kippur 5781
Rabbi Wendi Geffen

I haven't been able to sleep through the night since Mid-March. Usually, I wake up around 3am in a fog, my heart pounding and my mind racing: pandemic, isolation, suffering, civil unrest, injustice, violence, anger, fear, fires, murder hornets! And then I actually do practice what Rabbi Daniels taught us last week - I look around and name the first 5 things I see. This calms me enough to think to myself: is all of this really happening?

I wonder if this is something you have experienced in some way too? I'd love to know. If we were together, I'd be able to look at you and see if you were nodding or not, but alas, this is just one more of the many losses we've accumulated over these past many months - so many of the assumptions that anchored us or the markers that we always used to chart our lives - gone. It's disorienting, and it makes it difficult to discern, no less navigate through it all to the other, we pray, better side.

More than once I have found myself yearning for one of those big maps in the mall (remember malls?) with an arrow pointing to a distinctive red dot noting "You are here" and then locate a big green dot somewhere else that says "When things are better" so it would be simple to see how to get from here to there.

It turns out there is actually a whole field of study behind those mall maps called Wayfinding, a discipline that entails a set of design principles concerned with easing navigation around shared spaces. But Wayfinding comes from a significantly older practice by the same name, referring to techniques used by travelers over both land and sea on relatively unmarked routes to previously undiscovered destinations.

In Wayfinding, both then and now, there are four necessary criteria, what it calls orientation, route decision, monitoring, and recognition.¹

Of note is that just as Wayfinding helps with navigating treks or multi-storied buildings, so too can it help us as we navigate the challenges of our lives, when we find ourselves navigating unmarked routes to yet to be discovered destinations. So says Jewish tradition, at least, as the Torah seems to have scooped most traditional Wayfinding methods by at least a thousand years.

So we find ourselves now 6 months into the Covid 19 pandemic, 10 days into a New Year, with no clear roadmap nor horizon line to mark the end of what feels like endless chaos. Perhaps it is time for us to consider a little Jewish wayfinding to clear a path through this truly uncharted territory.

Step one - Orientation - Identifying our current position

Consider the very first question God asks in Torah. It comes just after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit. Feeling ashamed, they hide in the Garden. God then calls out to Adam: **"Where are you?"**²

¹ <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/infoarch/publications/mfoltz-thesis/node8.html>

² Genesis 3:9

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Now, nearly every commentator agrees this cannot be a question about Adam's physical location, because of course God knows where he is; instead, the question is a spiritual one; the Talmud³ says God's question notes a shift in Adam's soul, and as such God is really asking about the direction of Adam's heart. How has his spiritual stance changed as a result of his actions? Where is he now?

Where are you?

We shouldn't assume it's an easy question to answer. Like Adam and Eve, we convince ourselves we can hide, telling stories that make things appear to be one way, when our fuller, truer realities likely prove quite different. It's like being on zoom with a close up shot of you dressed professionally, a lovely plant or calming painting in the background; but then pull the shot wider to capture 360 degrees of true reality, revealing that your camera is stacked up on a pile of books precariously perched on a ladder, whose rungs are strewn with laundry, toys and takeout boxes pepper the floor, and you are not wearing pants!

But the hiding we do on Zoom is just a mild symptom of our profound human discomfort with the truth of our imperfections. This question of "where are you?" is at the heart of any cheshbon hanefesh process, the honest soul introspection that we are taught must precede meaningful repentance and returning. We spend so much time telling ourselves that we only are the way we are because someone else did something first. Besides this being the gateway to hypocrisy, it is ultimately a lie we tell to let ourselves off the hook.

If we cannot or are not willing to discern where we truly are as a starting point, or worse, if we tell ourselves we are somewhere else entirely, it will only steer us further off course.⁴

Our agency and ability to navigate in life rests in the truth of our ability to control how we are in this world, how we respond to whatever challenges we face. This is the only starting point that matters.

One of my favorite stories drives the message home:

A woman in a supermarket is following a grandfather and his badly behaved 3 year-old grandchild. It's obvious to her that he has his hands full with the child screaming for candy, cookies, you name it. Meanwhile, Grandpa is working his way around, saying in a controlled voice, "Easy William, we won't be long...easy, boy." Another outburst and she hears the grandpa calmly say, "It's okay, William, just a couple more minutes and we'll be out of here. Hang in there, boy."

³ Sanhedrin 38b

⁴ Rabbi Alan Lew z"l puts it this way: "...The unresolved elements in our lives -- the unconscious patterns, the conflicts and problems that seem to arise no matter where we go or with whom we find ourselves -- continue to pull us into the same moral and spiritual circumstances over and over again until we figure out how to resolve them. ...Spiritually we are called to responsibility, to ask, What am I doing to make this recur again and again? Even if it is a conflict that was clearly thrust upon me from the outside, how am I plugging into it...?... It is only here and now, in this moment, in this place—in the present—that we can act...So from a spiritual point of view, we need to ask, What can I do here and now, in the present-tense reality of my own experience?"

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With each outburst, the Grandpa calmly responds: "William, William, relax buddy, don't get upset. We'll be home in five minutes, stay cool, William."

Very impressed, the woman goes outside where the grandfather is loading his groceries and his grandchild into the car.

"It's none of my business," she says, " but you were amazing in there. William is very lucky to have you as his grandfather!"

"Thanks," said the grandpa, "But I'm William. The kid is Kevin!"

Step two: Route Decision - Identifying another point along the way

In a spiritual framework, this step involves understanding where we are in relation to others. Enter the second distinctive question God asks in Torah. After God accepts Abel's offering, but not his brother Cain's, Cain is thrown into a fit of jealousy and kills Abel. At which point, God inquires of Cain, "**Where is your brother?**"⁵

Here too, God knows exactly where Abel is, so implied within the question is the notion of our human responsibility for each other. That's why when Cain infamously, and wrongly, responds to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" the result is that he is banished forever - his own journey cut off because he fails to see that our own wayfinding rests not just on knowing where we ourselves are (whatever our story is), but on whether we notice the others (their stories), all of them, travelling the road beside us.

Where is your brother?

The condition of our fellows directly impacts the course of our own lives.

Some of you may have seen the large framed quote in my office from my friend and colleague Rabbi Jason Rosenberg that reads: "*They're not my problem* appears exactly never in Jewish texts." That's because a life that begins and ends with only my own self-interests never grows or really goes anywhere. But a life in which I can move from concern over my own wellbeing to that of my brother, my sister, my fellow human being, now that opens up a channel to a life with movement - a life that is full.

Ultimately, this is about inclusive empathy. Remember empathy? If you are listening at all, and do not feel for people in the Black community who are terrified, who are exhausted, who are grieving, who are...who are... who are... then you do not know where your brother is. If you are listening at all, and do not feel for police officers who are terrified, who are exhausted, who are grieving, who are... who are... who are... then you do not know where your sister is. If you are listening at all, and do not know that everyone around you is terrified, is exhausted, is grieving, is... is... is... then you do not know where your fellow is. You may as well be Cain. There is nowhere to go if we cannot go there together.

Martin Buber drives home the point: "We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow creature, by means of them and with them, find the way to God."⁶

⁵ Genesis 4:9

⁶ Buber, Martin. *Between Man and God*. 60

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Consider the story of Dr. Ludwig Guttman, a leading neurosurgeon in Germany in 1933. After escaping the Nazis, Guttman fled to England and eventually became the head of the first ever dedicated medical facility for the treatment of paraplegics. Guttman arrived at a horrific scene - the patients, mostly soldiers injured in war, were kept heavily sedated, as the understanding was that recovery was not possible. But Guttman saw their humanity. He cut their sedatives in half, got them sitting up in their beds; he even forced them to play catch - each move causing significant pain. Guttman was accused of cruelty. The lead doctor overseeing the tribunal asked him: "These are moribund cripples, who do you think they are?" to which Guttman replied, "They are the best of men!" Eventually Guttman got the patients out into the hospital garden in wheelchairs. Then he got them to play games, with the hospital doctors going in wheelchairs to compete against the patients, who were now enlivened, with excitement and feeling of purpose in their lives. The process grew into a national competition and then in 1948 took international status alongside the olympics. These parallel games were recognized in 1968 as an official part of the Olympics, birthing the paralympic games, with over 160 countries competing in 2016.⁷

Guttman didn't know what the ultimate destination would be, but he was able to discern a point outside his own starting point. He saw his fellow human beings; he saw them for their humanity, and he transcended himself to travel a new and better path alongside them.

Step three: Monitoring - Navigating well along the way.

This step is all about ensuring progress in the right direction and making changes as necessary. So travel back to our ancestors as they journeyed from slavery to freedom. Having left oppression's grip in Egypt, the Israelites journey out into the wilderness where they hit their first significant obstacle. Behind them, the advancing Egyptian army. Before them an expansive sea. Unsure of how to proceed, they cry out to God, but God rebukes them: "**Why do you cry out to me?**"⁸

It seems our ancestors cry out for good reason. But what we learn is that God won't take the journey for us; God won't steer the ship. If there are seas to cross or courses to correct, we must be the ones to do it. From a Jewish framework, "God acts through us, not to us."⁹ Our journeys are our own.

Why do you cry out to me?

Of note is that our ancestors were never given the exact coordinates for their destination. It's no different for us. Waiting around in a holding pattern for the right conditions or some sure guarantee of arrival, this does nothing but delay our lives. When it comes to living in the fullest and most meaningful ways, even in a storm of chaos, the only way is to move forward!

⁷ As told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *Morality*

⁸ Exodus 14:15

⁹ Sacks on Genesis 4

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There's an old parable that says it well:

A person has been wandering, lost in a forest for several days, not knowing the right way out. Suddenly they see another person approaching them. Hopeful of the other's knowledge, they ask: "Friend, tell me which is the right way. I have been wandering for days." The other replies: "I do not know the way out either as I've also been wandering here for days. But this I can tell you: don't take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. Instead, let's look for a new way out together."¹⁰

Turns out that when wayfinding along the journey of our lives to a better place, despite how much we might want them, we don't get to know the final coordinates. Because ultimately, the intended final destination is secondary to the journey itself and what we might find along the way there.

Do you know how much space the Hebrew Bible gives to the moment our ancestors finally arrive in the Promised Land - after 5930 verses of Torah anticipating the moment, describing every detail from the starting point through the entirety of the path along the way? A mere 51 verses, less than a chapter and a half, not even in the Torah itself¹¹, to celebrate the finish line. Why? Because the moment they arrive, another entirely different journey reveals itself. There is new ground to cover, a new destination to search for. This is why we say Next Year in Jerusalem, every year. We never get there. Jewish wayfinding does not have a 4th and final recognition phase. That would defeat the entire purpose.

Yes, there is so much that we've lost, but so too we've travelled through uncharted waters and discovered new frontiers. We've learned to do old things in new ways, from Zoom B'nei Mitzvah to parking lot Shabbats. We've found new ways to comfort each other, and we've learned the names of our neighbors again. We've learned we really are all in this together. These aren't necessarily the destinations we set out for or otherwise would have chosen, but we've arrived there and sanctified these moments nonetheless.

Judaism teaches that our lives are about the journey, and the paths we choose to take along the way, in spite of, or maybe even especially in times of challenge. Our Torah portion from this morning teaches: "See I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life that you may live."¹² These are not coordinates for a final destination - they are road signs. Because wherever we are is a destination in and of itself; each moment, wonderfully perfect or deeply flawed, ripe with holiness all the same - whether it be the blessing of all of us, God-willing, here, physically together next year, or at 3am tomorrow morning, awakening to a beating and ever feeling heart.

Gmar chatimah tovah - may we be signed and sealed for truth and kindness, courage and blessing, in the Book of Life.

¹⁰ As told by S.Y. Agnon

¹¹ The event is described in Joshua, the first book in Nevi'im/ProphetS

¹² Deuteronomy 30:19