



**“Moses Take the Wheel”**  
**Rabbi Joshua Heller**  
**Day 1 Rosh Hashanah 5779**

I was 16 years old, pulling the car into the driveway, when one of the congregants in my father’s synagogue walked by on the sidewalk. He offered an odd complement: “You will be an even greater rabbi than your father.”

That was rather a strange compliment. I mean, even at age 16 I could daven a mean musaf and fake a Torah reading on sight, but it was certainly not clear to me that I was going to follow the path of the 7 generations of rabbis before me.

He explained what he meant: “Well, you see, your dad only gets me to pray once a week, but you get me to pray every time you get behind the wheel!”

This past year, it was my turn to teach my son how to drive. Wendy and I had debated who would do it. I made several arguments to *dodge*<sup>1</sup> the responsibility. Of course, I’m pretty busy. Another major issue, and I can only say this because my insurance agent is at the other service today, is that I’m not the best driver. 90% of all drivers think they are above average drivers. I’m pretty sure I am in the other 10%, which either means I am awfully honest, or just awful. I also have some evidence to that effect. People are telling me that all the time. They don’t tell me in words, but even with the windows rolled up and the radio on, the hand gestures are pretty self-explanatory.

There were also arguments the other way, which turned out to be more compelling. That it would be something to do “man to man,” that I am more patient than my wife, and that my car is already paid off. The most compelling argument was Wendy telling me I had to. I could not *escape*.

I’m really glad that I did it. Teaching my son how to drive, for whatever skills I passed on, this was an *odyssey* where I actually learned much more than I taught. I want to share some of what I have learned with all of you here today. But you should know, this is actually not just a sermon about driving, or even about parenting in general. Also, the lessons that I learned really apply to all of us, whether or not we have ever sat in the front passenger seat pressing the invisible brake.

I learned that teaching is often about what you do, rather than what you say.

I learned that teaching, or really helping someone in general, often means leaning in, but not too far.

<sup>1</sup> Today’s sermon bingo- brands of cars



I learned that teaching is the greatest form of learning.

I learned that people learn more from what we do than what we say. Often, the unspoken lesson is very different from the spoken one. As Caleb got closer to getting his permit, I started to realize every bad driving habit I had: every glance at my phone, every rolling stop, every mile over the speed limit, every time I didn't put on a seatbelt because it was just a quick trip. If I wanted my kids to be better drivers, I would have to be one as well.

Parents are not always the best drivers. There's the story of the child whose teacher was telling them the story of Sodom and Gomorrah: "Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt." The student responded: "That's nothing, my mommy looked back while she was driving and turned into a telephone pole."

Even professional teachers, even those who teach teachers can run afoul of this. Before I came to Atlanta, I ran the on-line learning programs at JTS. We were offering classes in Jewish education. There was one instructor who talked a lot about education being learner-centered and interactive. And so, we posted video of a lengthy lecture on the topic.

How often is it in life that we say one thing but do something else? How many parents insist that their children eat their vegetables or keep to a bedtime or what have you, but do nothing of the sort themselves? It's certainly true when it comes to Judaism.

Every 6-9 months I lead a *L'mazel Tov* group for couples who are about to become parents for the first time. So, if you are expecting to be expecting or expectorating because you are expecting, let me know and you can join the next one in October. This is one of my favorite texts from that class:

A man came to the Hassidic rebbe, Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, and asked how he could make his sons devote themselves to Torah.

The Rabbi answered:

"If you really want them to do this, then you yourself must devote yourself to the Torah, and they will do as you do. Otherwise they will not devote themselves to the Torah, but only tell their sons to do it. And so, it will go on.

If you, yourself, forget the Torah, your sons will also forget it, only urging their sons to know it, and they will forget the Torah and tell their sons that they should know it. And no one will ever know the Torah."

There are a lot of us who are invested in having the next generation make great Jewish choices. We want them to connect to our rituals, to our history. We want them to engage in tzedakah, we want them to find meaning in prayer. We want



them to care about Israel. Whatever we may want them to become, the results are not totally up to us, but they are more likely to be the kind of Jews we **are** than the kind of Jews we **tell** them they should be.

We also learn this from God. Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:16 that we are to “Walk in God’s ways” The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayishlach 10) asks- “How can we walk in God’s ways? God travels in fire and whirlwind!” The answer is we can imitate what God does, engaging in acts of kindness. At the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve have no clothing, and God clothes the naked, so, too, we can clothe the naked. In just a few weeks, we will read that Moses died, and there was none to bury him, and God buried him. So, too, we tend to the dead. God knows that we gain even more from doing what He does, then doing what He says.

Of course, we can never truly be like God. We are not perfect. But we can learn by example; we can aspire.

The second thing I learned is that the most important relationships in life require leaning in, but not too far. They require knowing how much to hold on, and how much to let go. That’s a hard thing, because we Jews don’t like to let go. We don’t have a song “Moses take the wheel.”

It turns out I’m not the first parent trying to figure out how to deal with a teenage son. Let’s start with Abraham. I’m not talking about tomorrow morning’s reading, where the solution involves an altar and a knife, and some rope, and God will provide the ram. I’m talking about the Torah portion that we read this morning, from Genesis. Abraham’s son Ishmael is 13 when Isaac is born, and probably about 16 when Isaac is weaned. That’s when the trouble starts. The Torah tells us that Ishmael is *Metzachek*- which literally translates as “playing.” Perhaps more uncharitably, we can translate it as mockery, making fun of his younger half- brother, or his 90-year-old stepmother. Our sages understand it as something far worse. They translate it as bullying, idolatry, or other kinds of immorality. No matter what the cause, this is a kid who needs to be set straight.

Over the course of the story, we see four different approaches to Ishmael’s troubles. We see responses from Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, and God’s angel.

Sarah confronts Abraham: “Chase out the son of that maidservant.” Sarah’s response, when she sees a problem, is to wash her hands of it, write it off. Sometimes, when we see a person who needs help, our response is to say, “It’s not my problem, let someone else deal with it.” I’m going to write off that solution for the moment.

Let’s look at the other three approaches. There’s Abraham. Abraham was kind of a difficult kid himself, smashing his father’s idols and all. Abraham has a heavy heart when he sees what’s happening. He is truly conflicted, but God reassures



him “Isaac will be your true heir, but don’t worry, this boy will also become a great nation.” God tells him to listen to Sarah and send the boy and his mother away. So early the next morning, he gives Hagar a container of water and some bread and sends her off. Sure enough, mother and son get lost in the desert, the water runs out, and before long, Ishmael is about die of thirst. Hagar cannot bear to see her son suffering, so she sits off at a distance and weeps. It is at that moment that God steps in. An angel of God calls out to Hagar, and says, “Lift up the child, put your hand upon him.” The angel opens Hagar’s eyes, and she sees a well. She is able to get water to nurse her child back to health.

Hagar’s solution is really the opposite of Sarah’s but ultimately has the same outcome. Sarah doesn’t care about Ishmael at all. She says, “I want to wash my hands of this problem.” Hagar has the opposite issue; she is so overcome by her love of her son that she is paralyzed. She is so overwhelmed that she is ineffectual.

We certainly know many people who fall into one of these two responses of withdrawal. Of course, neither works, because to really teach someone, we have to be present.

Like many people, many rabbis, I’ll often take or make calls in my car. Someone is looking for me just as I’m about to run out to a meeting or a visit, so I say I’ll call them back when I know I’m going to be sitting in traffic, or I’ll listen in on a conference all when out on the open road. “Siri, call ....” Then I tried doing it while Caleb was driving. First of all, nothing livens up a conference call like someone screaming “OH MY GOD, WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE!” It turns out that watching my son drive required a lot more *focus* than driving myself (or at least a lot more attention than I was giving it). It was a big milestone when we were on our annual summer *expedition* to Alabama and he could drive almost the whole way while I tended to business.

To me, the two more interesting responses are those of Abraham and the angel.

Abraham knows that Hagar and Ishmael are going into the desert, so he gives them food and water. Abraham’s response is the most typical one to a problem, and at first glance, the most reasonable. We see a need, so we jump to the most obvious way to fill it. Just give someone an immediate solution, give someone the answer to their question. But they are going to be no better off when then next question comes around. In fact, they may be worse off. Hagar goes off into the desert with a false sense of security because she has supplies to take with her. If Abraham had tried to send her out with nothing, she probably would have refused to go, and the story would have been different.

The angel does something different, something a lot harder. The angel opens Hagar’s eyes, so she can find the well. The angel gives Hagar the tools to make her own discovery, to find her own long-term solution.



Give someone a bottle of water, no matter how big, and it will run out. Teach them to find a well, and there is water for a lifetime. Abraham Lincoln said: “You cannot help people permanently by doing for them, what they could and should do for themselves.”

When I was teaching Caleb to drive, there were plenty of times when we were in a rush, or he wasn't in the mood. It would have been a lot easier for me to take the wheel and let him wait until next time. There were a lot of times when he was behind the wheel and it would be a lot simpler to spoon feed him “signal now, you have an opening, turn, don't turn.” It was hard (and sometimes a bit frightening) to thread the path between Abraham and the angel. To hold back on giving him every tiny step and maneuver, but to still give him enough guidance that he could find his way. To be the navigator, not the pilot.

I also sometimes wondered whether I really needed to teach him at all. I briefly did the math on what it would cost to buy and insure a third car vs. giving him an open-ended Uber account, and it was intriguing. The Talmud (Kiddushin 29a) has a list of things a father is obligated to do for his son. A father must give his son a bris and a pidyon haben (check and check), marry him off (I've got time yet), teach him a trade, and maybe teach him to swim. Driving is not on there. And who knows, with self-driving cars, maybe my grandchildren won't need to learn to drive, any more than I needed to learn how to saddle up a horse. But the point Kiddushin is making is that parents have an obligation to help our children be self-sufficient. Some things, like a bris or pidyon haben, are things we simply have to do for them. But other things, like learning a trade, that's a skill that they need to learn for themselves.

It's a hard thing to learn as a parent. When I work with kids who are preparing speeches for Bar and Bat Mitzvah, there are the ones whose parents are totally checked out, like Hagar or Sarah. “Rabbi, you deal with this for us.” Then there are the ones whose parents pull an Abraham. They just write the speech. You can tell because the speech has words in it that the kid would never use and might not even know. No 7<sup>th</sup> grader wants to “establish a paradigm” or “explore a dialectic” It's really hard to be like the angel, to give someone the tools that they need to solve their own problems, and not solve them for them.

This is not just about driving, or kids. There's a story about one of the world's great efficiency experts. He was sought after the world over to help businesses save money by streamlining all kinds of processes. At one of his lectures, he concluded with a note of caution. “Please don't try these techniques at home.”

“Why not?” asked one of the members of the audience.

The expert explained: “I watched my family's breakfast routine for years. My wife made lots of trips from the fridge to the counter to the stove to the table, back and



forth. Often carrying one item at time, or even with her hands empty. One day I told her ‘Darling, why don’t you try changing the order you do things, and carrying several things at once?’”

The audience member asked, “Did it save time?”

The expert responded, “As a matter of fact it did. It used to take my wife 20 minutes to make breakfast. Now I do it in 7.”

Often, I will be sitting in a meeting, and within about 30 seconds, or sometimes even before I walk in the room, I’m pretty sure that I have a great answer to the problem or the issue being discussed. I’m entering my 20<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi. I’ve seen a lot of situations, a lot of meetings go by. No need to re-invent the wheel. Sometimes I’m very tempted to cut to the chase and propose my answer. But often that’s not the point. People are much more invested in solutions that they come up with themselves than the ones that we propose or impose by *fiat*.

Psychologists have done a study that confirms this. They gave people lottery tickets and offered to buy them back. You were giving up the chance of a big, but very uncertain reward, for a small guaranteed profit on something you didn’t buy to begin with. Because they are psychology researchers and couldn’t just let people be happy, they divided the group in half. Some people got to choose their own numbers, others were given tickets with the numbers already chosen. The people who chose the lottery numbers themselves demanded five times as much money as the people whose numbers were assigned. Because they felt like they had made a choice, they were five times more invested, even though objectively the winning numbers hadn’t even been chosen yet, and they had no greater chance of winning. The only way to make people truly invested is to let them invest, to make them feel like they have taken a stake.

That’s particularly hard to do when the stakes are high. The stakes are only so high in breakfast, or even in a bar mitzvah speech. The stakes are high in driving. There’s a scary feeling when you see your kid take off for the first time. They are pulling out of the garage and there is every chance that they will take the second most expensive thing you own and ram it into the most expensive thing you own. Or frankly, when you realize that what’s in the driver’s seat is more precious to you than either of those things.

But there are situations where the stakes are higher still. Six years ago, I gave a sermon about the challenges of addiction in our Jewish community. I was tempted to repeat that sermon this year, because we are in the grip of an epidemic of addiction, whether to the old classics like alcohol or to newer, even deadlier drugs like opioids. They are causing an unprecedented level of loss and destruction, in the larger American community, and, many of use refuse to admit, our Jewish community as well. I won’t repeat the whole sermon, you can read it online, but I



will say this- that there are those of us who, when faced with a loved one facing one of the most difficult, most life-threatening challenges possible, simply shut down, like Sarah or Hagar, and I can't fault that. There are those who simply want to fix the symptoms, like Abraham. We'll get that DUI off your record. We'll get you into another school. We won't let you hit bottom. One needs the wisdom and patience of an angel to do the really hard work of getting someone to realize they need help, and take ownership of choosing a different path, turning over a new *leaf*, when every nerve receptor in their brain is itching for something destructive. It's a lesson that our society still has to learn.

It's literally a life and death issue. That's why every week, our congregation hosts an AA meeting for those recovering from addiction and an Al-Anon meeting, for those who are facing the effects addiction of a loved one. That's why on Friday, just two working days before the holiday, I left the office, and left my sermon writing, to go to lead a group at the Berman Center.<sup>2</sup> The Berman Center is something new and amazing that has happened since I gave that addiction sermon. Some of the best addiction treatment centers here in Georgia are based in Christian belief. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's hard to check your faith at the door when it matters most. That's why it makes such a difference that the Berman Center is a Jewish-faith based addiction treatment center. It's having an impact in our community. We're partnering with them to have a major event here in October.

So, as I mentioned, they are Jewish inspired, and they invite rabbis from the community to come and spend time with their clients. Oddly enough, the slot two days before Rosh Hashanah was open. I took an hour of what could have been prime sermon-writing time to sit with 15 people struggling to overcome addiction, some of them Jewish, many not. Some of the insights I'm sharing today came from that conversation. Which brings me to my final point: teaching is not a one-way street.

It's not that the teacher imparts knowledge, and the student absorbs it. In fact, the opposite is sometimes true. In some ways, that is really the whole point of my remarks this morning. In the Talmud, Ta'anit 7a Rabbi Hanina said: "I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned most of all."

In fact, real teaching, real relationships, require openness to what you might learn. More than that, it requires humility. One has to accept the fact that you may come away with a better answer than the one you came in with.

That's true even of God. Today is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of creation of the world. The idea that God created the world poses a major philosophical

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bermancenteratl.com/>



question. We all know people who, when they walk into the room, take up all the air, and don't leave any space for anyone else. Well, God literally takes up EVERYTHING. If God is infinite, if God is everywhere, how could God create the world? Where would He put it? How would there be room for anything else? What's left after infinity?

This summer I was in S'fat, a town in Northern Israel that was the center of Jewish mysticism about 400 years ago. I visited the synagogue, and immersed in the Mikvah, of the rabbi, the mystic, who came up with an amazing answer to that question. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, explained that before the universe could be created, God had to engage in a process called Tzimtzum, Tzimtzum means contraction. God had to move out of His own way, God had to, so to speak, give up ground, for the universe to come into being. In a similar way, we humans have to leave room, we have to get out of the way, for others to exist and grow. God did that even knowing that people would mess up. There would be grand theft apple, Cain killing Abel, a flood, a tower of Babel. But God had to give humanity room to learn.

Before I talked about letting people do the work, come up with the answers themselves, so they would be invested. But this is different. It's one thing to be patient, to let people explore on their own, giving people time to come up with YOUR answers. It's another thing to give people time to come up with THEIR answers. It's one thing to be patient when others come up with the wrong answers. It is something else to acknowledge that their answers are better than yours.

Just before Caleb got his license, I took him to a defensive driving class<sup>3</sup>. The folks involved can best be described as "eccentric." One of the activities involved driving over a stuffed squirrel. There's a point to it; if you are travelling at high speed and swerve to avoid an animal, you are risking human life, and you may end up hitting the animal anyway. Let's face it, if there's a squirrel that is not smart enough to get out of your way, well, let God and Darwin work that one out. We spent five hours in the Lassiter High School parking lot, with Caleb practicing all sorts of driving maneuvers, swerving around cones, jamming on the brakes in dry and wet conditions.

The final test involved putting it all together, accelerating and then having just a fraction of a second of warning to jam on the breaks, swerve around an obstacle and come to a stop without running over any of the cones that represented pedestrians, other cars, light poles, etc. We were at a disadvantage. Most of the families were in vehicles that were a little more high performance than my 7- year- old Toyota minivan. Caleb made a couple of runs and did pretty well. The very

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.accidentavoidanceworkshops.org/>



last exercise was “ok parents, now you try it.” Wouldn’t you know it, when it was my turn, I knocked over at least one more cone than he did.

One of the greatest tests as a parent, as a teacher, as a mentor, is the moment when you begin to suspect that your child, your student, may be better than you- smarter than you, stronger than you. If you shoot hoops- that moment when your kid can beat you at one-on-one. If you knit, when your kid can out-knit or perl you. When your protégé or your intern is able to go on to even bigger roles. It should be that way. It must be that way. After all, who wants the next generation to be inferior? Who wants each generation to be diminished?

There’s a famous story (TB Bava Metziah 59a) that is to that point. Rabbi Eliezer and the sages were debating the ritual status of a particular kind of oven. They weren’t actually debating whether it could be made kosher, but they might as well have been. Rabbi Eliezer was right, and he was pretty insistent. He said, “If I’m right, let the carob tree prove it.” Sure enough, the carob tree jumped 100 cubits. The sages responded. “The carob tree is no proof.” Rabbi Eliezer was undaunted. He declared, “If I’m right, let this stream show it.” And the stream began flowing the other way. The rabbis were unimpressed. Rabbi Eliezer made another appeal, “If I’m right, let the walls of the Beit Midrash, the house of study, show it.” The walls leaned, and Rabbi Joshua warned the walls, “stay out of this!” Finally, a heavenly voice called out, “Why would you disagree with Rabbi Eliezer. He is always right!” Rabbi Joshua responded with a verse from last week’s Torah portion, “It is not in heaven.” In other words, “Just because God agrees with Rabbi Eliezer doesn’t change anything, now it’s 3 to 2.” Rabbi Eliezer is not happy. There’s a rift between him and the rest of the Rabbis that lasts his whole lifetime. His anger causes the seas to rage, the crops to be blighted.

How did God feel to be overruled? Surely He was even more furious? How would we know? There’s a mystical belief that the prophet Elijah continues to travel between earth and heaven, and the story goes Rabbi Natan had the opportunity to ask the prophet, “What did God say at that moment?” Elijah’s response was that God responded with joy and laughter, “My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me.”

God is the ultimate teacher. God knows that people do not they hear us say, but what they see us do. God knows that you can’t simply give someone the answers. The best you can do is open their eyes. God knows that the greatest teachers are those who leave room, as it were, for their students to grow and even perhaps surpass them, to take pride in the accomplishments of others. I had probably learned all those things, in some sense, from my many teachers, from the books on my shelf. I learned those things, in a different way, sitting in the passenger seat of my minivan.



Of course, ironically, this sermon about helping people learn things for themselves has not really followed through on that promise. So, I leave you with this question: How will you learn those lessons for yourself this year?

Maybe you are a parent, and you have to figure out how to help your children, whatever their age, grow. Maybe you are a teacher and have to figure out how to inspire students to truly make their own meaning. Maybe you work with a group that has to find its way. Maybe you have the opportunity to be a mentor, or just a friend. Will you give someone the space to find their own answers, not by withdrawing, not by spoon feeding, but by helping them build their own skills and confidence? Will you find the way to inspire by example, by your actions rather than your words?

As you set out on the road in 5779, there's a lot you can learn sitting in the passenger seat.