

ROUGH ROAD

It's eleven miles from Blue Hill to Brooklin, Maine. State Highway 172, which changes names from South Street to Salt Pond Road to North Sedgwick Road along the way, is a two-lane asphalt road with hills and valleys, twists and turns as it meanders from the urbane *Tradewinds* food market of Blue Hill to my summer rental along Eggemoggin Reach in Brooklin. By now, I know exactly where the sharp turns are. I anticipate the hills, the spots where the fog is predictable, even the places where the deer dart from the woods unannounced.

The ride is quite pleasant. Except, that is, for the Sedgwick portion. In Sedgwick, a smaller than small town between Blue Hill and Brooklin, the roads yellow line all but disappears. It probably hasn't been repainted in ten years. The road itself is a composite of years of filled-in pot holes, a bumpy ride if ever there was one. And you wonder, "When are they going to resurface? This is ridiculous." Forget trying to drink that cup of coffee on your drive into town. And for the passenger in the car, don't even think of texting on your smartphone. It's better to just wait until you cross the town line into Brooklin or Blue Hill (depending on your direction, of course).

For whatever reason, I'd never paid much attention to this stretch of road before this summer. Maybe I was so smitten with the beautiful vistas along the way that I simply failed to pay attention to the road itself. But now, after several years of driving the same route, the view has grown somewhat more mundane, the serpentine path has become routine. Now I'm more aware of the ride itself. I guess I'm becoming a "local." I'm even paying attention to the road signs. Indeed, for the first time I noticed that just as you're leaving Blue Hill and entering Sedgwick there's one of those big yellow signs, a square turned on its point. It reads: "Rough Road." Duh. "Thanks a lot," I say to myself. As if I need a road sign to tell me this. But then I do the math. Given the meager resources of the small town, it becomes clear. It's easier (and cheaper) to simply put up a sign than actually fix the road. And that made me think of the High Holy Days.

We're pretty much the same way. Doing *teshuvah*, doing serious repair of one's "self" (or *neshamah* in Hebrew) is hard work. It comes at a not small cost. Whether it's probing psychotherapy or focused spiritual examination, well we know that it's a lot easier to simply put up a sign. *Al chet shechatanu lifanekha*. For the sin we commit before You. You know the list. No need to repeat it here. We say the words. We beat our breast. We stand up. We go home. Until next year. The road remains "rough."

Of course, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are intended to be more than just road signs. They are an annual exercise goading us to take ourselves a bit more seriously, to pay attention to our dreams and work on our shortcomings, to appreciate that we are imperfect beings and that life would be a lot better (for those around us as well as for ourselves) if we bothered to actually do some work on our *neshamas*. Our relationships would be smoother. Our work would be more rewarding. We would feel more whole. We would *be* more whole. But, well we know, the real work comes *after* the Holy Days. That's why the first mitzvah incumbent upon us after we leave the synagogue on Yom

Kippur is to hammer a nail into our *sukkah*. To build. To make something. To do something concrete. To do more than just say we will do it. And it's hard stuff. It requires more than just a patching of potholes.

For a lot of us, we want our experience of Judaism to be filled with joy. We want it to be fun. And much of our tradition is just so. But at its core, the *raison d'être* of our faith is *Tikkun Olam* – the repairing of the world. This is why we exist as a people. Nevertheless, as the rabbis remind us, we cannot possibly expect to do *Tikkun* in the world until we are able to do the same work on ourselves. We are each a microcosm, pot holes and all, works in progress. And the question we should each bring with us into the new year is how long we're content to continue traveling the rough road.

Not long before I left Brooklin, I noticed yet another sign on State Highway 172. In fact, it was just about twenty yards in front of the "Rough Road" sign. This sign read: "Under Construction." It gave me hope for next year's summer vacation to Maine. And that is the real message of these Days of Awe. We are all "under construction." The only thing remaining to be answered is whether the words we utter on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur will actually be signs of things to come, or just a signpost telling us what we already know?