

Defensive Driving?: How Elie Wiesel Taught Me Driver's Ed
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Mark Twain once said that the two most important days in your life are the day that you are born and the day you find out why. For some of us, it takes a lifetime to find our purpose, our mission- the true meaning for which we were brought into this world. And on days like today, our high holidays and Jewish new year- we search deep inside to find our why! This year, our oldest son Jacob found his reason for living at the advanced age of 16- for him- his why is getting a driver's license. The thought of a new young driver on the road is intimidating and scary- best stated by the title of my favorite read during the month of Elul by the late Rabbi Alan Lew- "This is real and you are completely Unprepared."

I'd like to share with you a few of the lessons that I've learned teaching our son to drive- and how they can help us each prepare for a better year starting today. The new year has many names, each with a secret nod to driving. Rush Hashana, with the emphasis on the Rush, the first lesson a student driver must remember is the difference between the gas pedal and the brake pedal- when to push it and when to slow down in life. Today, speed traps and cameras await at so many corners reminding us that G-d is always watching and recording our mistakes.

Yom Teruah- Today is also called the day of the blasting of the horn- you thought the Torah was referring to the Shofar and not a car horn? Before turning on a car for the first time- it is important to identify, inspect and check each instrument and button on the dashboard- so too during the Aseret Yemai Teshuvah- the 10 days of Repentance- we are required to look inside ourselves- identify, inspect and examine our inner workings- a spiritual tune-up of sorts- to clean out the gunk left over in the transmission- to re-align the tires- to take a closer look at our relationships, our words, our actions and deeds- and see what needs to be fixed and improved- to say I'm sorry and to make amends. Whenever I get my car checked and it's being returned to me

even better than new- the mechanic gives me a courtesy honk which I understand as an all clear sign- like that last shofar note at the end of Neilah- like my car has been written into the book of life for another 3,500 miles- until the next oil change- and so may it be for each and everyone of us.

We practiced honking- and it literally sounded like the shofar blasts warning other drivers to pay attention- avoid distractions and put down their phones- stay in their lane- a wake up call to action. The Shofar is our cry to G-d to help us, protect us and listen to us as well as G-d's wake up call reminding us to find our why, to repent and change our ways, our call to live a life that has meaning and make this year count.

I was taught to be a defensive driver anticipating dangerous situations, the mistakes of others and reacting. How can we be a defensive driver on the road of life in 2019? Our world is not the same as it was even just one year ago. Today, we come to celebrate a joyous holiday when synagogues in America have been attacked by gunmen, burned to the ground by arson, desecrated and defamed- where congregants and rabbis- people just like you and me- have been shot at, wounded and even killed while attending services. The same for churches, Walmarts, movie theaters, schools and bars.

Anti-Semitism, hate, prejudice, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and violence are all on the rise. We are living in a fractured world where hate, division and dissension reign. There are different lanes on a highway- we don't all have to agree with each other- we can be on the left or the right, the center or even going the other way- but we must come to the realization that we are on the same road together. Is that enough to simply acknowledge that we are all one?

Our most quintessential prayer- the Shema- our personal statement of faith- can also be understood as a collective statement of equality and responsibility- Shema Yisrael- come together Israel. Interestingly, if you look closely at the letters of the Shema in a Torah scroll and prayerbook- two letters are written larger than any other- they are the last letters of the

first and last word- the letters Ayin and Dalet- which spell Eid- and mean Witness- that we see the unity in our world and will stand up to testify and fight for it.

For guidance, I turned to the work of the late Elie Wiesel- the ultimate witness- the voice of reason in a world spinning out of control- a Holocaust survivor, advocate, watch-dog, moral leader and teacher. One of his long time Boston University graduate assistants Ariel Burger recently published *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom* sharing an insider's look at Elie Wiesel the teacher, college professor and life coach. He answers the questions of how to live in our world today, how to turn suffering into a bridge for a better tomorrow, how not to be a defensive driver and how to be a witness to raise the alarm when moral amnesia takes hold and hate festers. The book mainly spoke through Elie's stories:

A student once asked the famed Kotzker Rebbe, "Why did it take G-d six days to create the world? Look at it- it's filled with corruption, cruelty and inhumanity!"

The Rebbe replied, "Can you do better?"

And the student brashly said, "Yes, I think I can!"

And the Rebbe said, "So Nu, what are you waiting for? Get started! Go to work immediately!"

In his class when telling the story, Elie Wiesel added, "This is what I feel when I wake up. (It's) Another day, I've been given a life, I must do something with it. And there is so much to do.

As Pirkei Avot says, the day is short and the task is great- we are not obligated to desist from it- we must give it our all even if we can't see it to completion. We each have a responsibility to fix our world and not simply be a defensive driver protecting ourselves and that's it. So where do we start?

Elie Wiesel again provides his answer with a story:

You start where you are. With what you have seen? Abraham Joshua Heschel, the civil rights leader, was for a time the head of admissions for (my) rabbinical school JTS years ago. One day, a student arrived for an interview and Heschel asked how he traveled to the seminary. He said that he had walked nearly 50 blocks in New York City from Lincoln Center up to 122nd Street (near Harlem). Professor Heschel asked, Did you see the homeless woman on 96th street? The one with the hand-printed sign and the blankets? The student said no, I didn't see her.

“Did you see the Army Veteran on 117th street? The man with the gray beard and missing most of his teeth, he usually wears a baseball cap? The student said no.

“Did you see the tall man with the dreadlocks in front of Zabars with his hands in the air as if he's praying? Once again, the student replied he had not.

Heschel said, “How can you become a rabbi if you don't see the human beings around you?”

Elie Wiesel added, “You don’t have to go far- your street, family, friends, community- what are their needs, what is their pain. You just need to touch one person every day with compassion.”

Our success in responding to world-changing events is often measured by the small moments and encounters. If we can act with greater sensitivity to others, if we act with courage and choose humanity over inhumanity, it does not seem that it can affect the larger trajectory of history. But I believe it can.

Ever the teacher, Wiesel reminds us of our responsibility to the other- even the other living in our home, on our street or in our neighborhood. Whether it is reaching out to strengthen personal relationships- getting more involved through our GCC, Chesed, Sunshine Committee and other social and social action groups, it’s time to take the first step.

Elie Wiesel shared this message on how to fight hate in our world: We know so much about how hatred works. It starts with words and symbols and ends with killing. Hatred is like a cancer, and it transcends all boundaries. At The Anatomy of Hate Conference- we learned one thing- when you face evil- don’t let it grow. Fight it right away and be watchful. We all share a common origin; our destinies are entwined. Anyone who is suffering or threatened becomes your responsibility. I do not know how to end hatred but recognizing our shared humanity is a good beginning.

He cautioned us not to be defensive drivers –we have to take responsibility, call out hate and act to save our world:

So often we are told not be too passionate, not to feel too much, to go along with the world as it is. I reject that. I believe that we are meant to feel strongly, deeply and awaken and cultivate our yearning for

good. Only then can we have the chance of overcoming those who are passionate for the wrong things in this world.

The rabbis say that Teshuvah- repentance is an act of belief in the future- not a leap of faith- a leap of hope. If we can change, then our world can change for the better. As Anne Frank wrote, “How wonderful it is that no one has to wait, but can start right now to gradually change the world.” We have come here this celebrating a fresh start, praying for a healthy, happy and sweet New Year with open eyes. Will we take responsibility and feel the obligation to stand up as a witness to injustice & hate and start right now to change the world?

Today’s Torah reading details the sending out of Hagar and her distress as her son is dying of thirst in the desert. She plays her last card and cries out to G-d for help- and G-d answers- the Torah says- Vayifkach Elohim et Eineha- G-d opened her eyes and she saw a well of water right there in front of her. The commentaries discuss whether G-d miraculously made a well appear or if it had always been there but she just had been blind to it. We close our eyes too much in this world, taking a passive or defensive posture. Elie Wiesel passionately reminds us us that we must never be silent- we must continually bear Witness- fervently standing up for the wronged, calling out hate, reaching out to sister and brother, strengthening relationships as we work on perfecting ourselves through the work of teshuvah.

Mark Twain said the two most important days in your life are the day that you are born and the day you find out why. Let today be the day we find our why.

Shana Tova U’Metukah- May we all be inscribed in the book of life for a sweet year of happiness, health, inspiration, kindness, and may we raise our voices for the powerless, mend our relationships, improve ourselves and if we do these- then it will most certainly be a sweet year filled with peace.

AMEN