

Our Journey:
Where Are We Going and What Will We Do When We Get There?

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I want to invite you to imagine that we are going to set out to travel together on a journey, a journey that begins tonight, and will last 10 days. (Don't worry – you will each have your own private cabin.)

How can we prepare for it? What will we pack and what baggage will we take with us on this journey? What will we leave behind? Where is it that we are going, and how will we get there? How will we know when we will have arrived at our destination? How will this trip affect us upon our return? What will be our memories of our time together? Will those memories become a part of our reality?

This is one way to view the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance, or Return that we usher in this evening. I like to think of this time of year, from Rosh HaShanah until Yom Kippur, as a communal voyage in which each of us travels together, but at our own pace. The interplay between individual and community originates in the Torah itself. For although it, and thus Judaism is concerned with the fate of individuals, the covenant we make with God is made between God and the people as a whole.

We have some familiar guideposts to help us along the way. The customs and traditions of the season are welcome and recognized, trusted companions, who have served us well in the past. The prayers of our mahzor that we recite are our navigation system. They can lead us to where we are going, but we are the ones behind the wheel and with our foot on the pedal. We determine how fast we are going, when to stop at a rest stop, and which route to take. Some of the route is familiar. Some of the prayers bring us comfort. Some are obtuse, hard to decipher, decode and difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, we do not discard them, but try to understand what they mean.

A story told by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach about Reb Dovid Leikes, one of the most learned disciples of the Baal Shem Tov who left his village to be with his rebbe, the great Baal Shem Tov for Yom Kippur is of a man, who like us, was on a journey.

As Reb Dovid departed from his village, he was plagued by a number of setbacks and delays. First there was a problem with one of the horses, then with another. Then a wheel of the wagon broke, and then it turned over altogether. He was getting worried, as the trip which normally would take a day was now taking more than three days. Finally, the end was in sight, with less than an hour before the onset of the Yom Kippur holiday he was a few miles away from his destination. He pleaded with his horses to hurry and not cause any more problems or delays so he could make it to the town of Medzhibozh before sunset.

Suddenly, just when he thought all of the obstacles were behind him, he saw some people running across a field from a small shtetl nearby frantically waving to him to stop. As he slowed down, they ran out and begged Reb Dovid, "We are nine Jews, living in a little village here. We need one more person so we can have ten for our minyan to recite our prayers. Please stay with us."

“Are you crazy?” he asked incredulously, and proceeded to explain. “I’ve been travelling for three days to reach Medzhibohz so I can spend Yom Kippur praying with my rebbe. Please don’t be angry with me, but you are asking too much of me. I cannot help you.”

Brokenhearted, the nine men watched as the rabbi galloped away.

When the rabbi arrived in Medzhibohz everyone stood in line to wish the rebbe a Gut Yom Tov. When it was Reb Dovid’s turn, somehow, the Baal Shem Tov skipped over him. And the same thing happened after Ne’ilah, at the conclusion of the holiday as well. By the time shabbos arrived, and he was getting the same treatment, he realized this was not just a coincidence or accident, but that the master was actually ignoring him. He asked, “Tell me, dear Rebbe. What is wrong? What did I do wrong that you are upset with me?”

The Baal Shem Tov responded, “Reb Dovid, your soul has been waiting hundreds of years for the chance to daven with those nine men. For this were you created. This is why you were brought into this world: to pray with them, to make that group of nine a minyan. “

What does the story mean? And what is its relevance to Rosh Hashana and the journey we begin tonight? It is not just an archaic, nostalgic story, about a chasid in a shtetl, rushing to be with his rebbe, but one with implications for us today as well. How often are we so intent on reaching our destination, that we do not see that the true purpose of our mission may be not what we originally thought, and may be right in front of us, along the way. How often do we get so focused that we do not see those who along the way who may need us even more?

So as we begin our journey, let us pause and reflect: Where are we going? Where will our journey take us? We do not know. We are, however, captains of our ship, captains of our fate. How shall we use the days ahead, the life we have been given? What is our purpose in life, and how can we fulfill it? These are the questions for us to ponder as we commence our journey which begins tonight. As we say, *nesiyah tovah*, which in English means: “Bon Voyage.”

May your journey be a meaningful one. May it take you to places where the words of God are heard, so you will find the presence of the Holy One along the way.

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