

Changing Lanes

Rabbi Miller – 2018- 5779

The summer I turned 16, I enrolled in the driver's education course offered at my local high school. My first day of class also marked my first time ever behind the wheel of an automobile.

The instructor smiled at this news. "Great," he said, "A clean slate for me to work with." After going through the safety check and securing my seatbelt, we drove out of the parking lot. The instructor talked while I drove, occasionally pausing to give me a direction.

"Turn right over there," he said. Then he asked, "Do you know what the hardest thing is to learn while driving?" I replied, "No," as I completed the turn.

"Knowing how and when to change lanes. We will start there." He pointed ahead, and I realized, with horror, that I had turned onto an entrance for the highway. Day 1 of Driver's Ed - 55 miles per hour and changing lanes!

Well, I survived. Though there were some harrowing moments. Most importantly, I remember the message he drilled into me. Driving in a straight line is easy. But it has its limitations. You are dependent upon others in front of you to set the speed. And, when the road splits, or exits appear, the lane you are in may not be taking you to the right location.

Changing lanes is not easy. There are a lot of variables – checking mirrors and blind spots, while keeping an eye on traffic and maintaining a steady hand on the wheel. It is understandable that some feel uncomfortable with this aspect of driving. At the same time, changing lanes is part of our transportation reality. At least until the driverless cars arrive.

Life lacks the lines and signage of a roadway, but we know that our journeys through this world require changing metaphorical lanes. On Yom Kippur, our tradition forces us to assess our situation. We look in the rearview mirror to review what we passed, examine our maps to determine our destination, and then consider whether we chose the right lane to reach that goal. Our tradition expects that over the course of the year we strayed from our intended path. After all, no one is perfect. The liturgy of Yom Kippur emphasizes that God desires *teshuvah* - a return to the right path instead of punishment.

In order to return, one needs to change lanes. That requires a combination of motivation and courage, a clear signal and mirror check, and decisiveness to implement change when opportunities present themselves.

We naturally embrace inertia and follow the momentum that carries us along our current path. In order to return, one needs to establish a motivation for change, as well as some level of courage to leave behind the familiar of the status quo.

On March 2, 1962, in Hershey, Pennsylvania, Wilt Chamberlain played the single greatest individual game of basketball in the history of the sport.¹ That night, Chamberlain scored 100 points against the New York Knicks and set several single game records. Included on that list, the record for most free-throws made in a game, as Chamberlain sank 28 of his 32 foul shots.

That record stands out, because Chamberlain struggled his whole career shooting foul shots, with a career average of 51%! That means that with no one defending, he made only every other shot.

Ironically, he made a higher percentage of shots when guarded! During the season of his 100 point game, Chamberlain achieved his best year shooting free throws, accounting in part for a record-setting average of more than 50 points per game. What made the difference? That whole year he shot free throws under-handed – “granny-style” as it is sometimes called. Chamberlain employed that technique only for one year. Every other season, before and after that historic year, Chamberlain used an overhand approach, making fewer shots, and never coming close to his scoring success.

Why would one of the greatest players use a technique that didn’t work?

Author Malcolm Gladwell asked this question in one episode of his podcast, *Revisionist History*. Shooting underhanded free throws complies with the rules of basketball. The best free throw shooter in professional basketball history, Rick Barry, used the underhand technique to earn a place in the Hall of Fame. Given the premium placed on scoring, one expects more players to follow Barry’s example. However, the vast majority of college and professional players use the less efficient overhand shot.

Gladwell reveals that Chamberlain understood the improvement made by shooting under-handed. However, Chamberlain felt the technique made him appear weak and less masculine. Although he possessed motivation to change, Chamberlain felt pressure from society and his peers to remain in his lane. Without sufficient courage to switch, we can only wonder what else he could have accomplished.

Recognizing the factors motivating Chamberlain to alter his shot, it’s easy to criticize his choice and claim that we would shoot underhanded if it meant scoring more points. But would we?

No choice exists in a vacuum. Human beings possess a complex set of emotions that influence the path that we follow in life. Looking in the rearview mirror, at 5778, did we choose a path that led to our full potential? When facing difficult situations, did we choose correctly even when that choice defied popularity?

We rarely, if ever, choose on a completely rational basis. Emotions, like those influencing Chamberlain, often impact the decisions that we make. One needs courage, as well as confidence, to boldly change lanes and defy current norms.

Though Chamberlain passed up an open lane to success, not all lanes remain clear. Change requires thoughtful transition – taking the time to turn on your blinker to signal

¹ This story appears in *Revisionist History* podcast by Malcolm Gladwell. “The Big Man Can’t Shoot.” Season 1, episode 3.

before entering the new lane. Even then, we know a blinker does not guarantee a smooth shift. One needs to check mirrors and blind spots before changing lanes, to avoid crashes.

Ignaz Semmelweis, a young doctor in 1846, demonstrates the value of this advice. Semmelweis began his career in the maternity ward of the General Hospital in Vienna. Semmelweis noticed a disturbing pattern after his arrival. A high number of women died during their hospital stay from an illness called “childbed fever.” Semmelweis noted that the ward consisted of two halves. One half staffed by physicians and nurses, and the other by midwives. Patients on the physician side died at a rate five times greater than the midwife side.

Slowly but surely, Semmelweis eliminated possible factors causing the disparity. Finally, Semmelweis realized that the doctors performed many duties not required of the midwives, including autopsies and interacting with other hospital patients. Armed with this information, Semmelweis hypothesized that the doctors spread illness from these additional activities. To combat the problem, he established the very first handwashing guidelines for doctors. Immediately, the mortality rate in the doctor’s ward dropped.

We know today the power of handwashing to prevent the spread of illness and disease. So, you might expect that Semmelweis’ contemporaries celebrated his discovery – and established handwashing guidelines everywhere. Quite the opposite. Semmelweis angered many of his colleagues, who felt that he blamed doctors for spreading illness. He also lacked tact, compounding the negative reaction by publicly berating those who disagreed with him. Soon, he not only fell out of favor, Semmelweis lost his job. Handwashing guidelines, which had proven successful, were scrapped.

Semmelweis presented undeniable proof that washing hands saved lives. Mortality rates plummeted when his protocols came into place. Yet, that proof was not enough. Semmelweis failed to check his blind spots or mirrors. Careening into the new lane, he crashed into the other doctors. When they resisted his idea, Semmelweis only turned harder, winding up in a professional ditch alongside the road.

Effective and lasting change requires a thoughtful transition process. Change, even good change, resembles the impact of a stone being thrown into a still pond. Waves ripple and echo away from the point of entry. One needs to signal and prepare before entering the next lane. On the road, when one car changes lanes, other vehicles slow down, speed up, or adjust in reaction to this new positioning. We experience a similar adaptation in our lives. Each one of us exists within a complex ecosystem of other individuals. When we shift lanes, that impacts others around us.

Signaling our intent to change prepares those around us, while also empowering them to support our lane change. Open communication strengthens relationships, and avoids potential misunderstandings. Don’t change alone – allow others to provide strength and courage, as well as guidance. Their perspective may help discover hidden obstacles.

After all, one needs to check mirrors and blind spots before making transitions. We call them blind spots for a reason! We cannot anticipate or predict exactly how others will

react. But, that does not absolve us from making an effort to check, before we change lanes.

We often possess enough information to know potential outcomes. In the story, Semmelweis acted as a crusader, failing to consider his colleagues. This resulted in clashing opposition between doctors, rather than a collaboration to address the death of patients.

Whether we find an open lane like Wilt Chamberlain, or create space for change by signaling in advance, we know that traffic remains unpredictable. Weather, road construction and accidents lead to traffic delays, detours, and open lanes closing without warning. A sign proclaiming the old Yiddish adage, “Man plans and God laughs,” should adorn every highway in America. With so much uncertainty, it takes wisdom and foresight to change lanes when afforded the opportunity.

This year the Jewish community suffered a great tragedy when Rabbi Aaron Panken, the dynamic young President of Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform seminary, died in a plane crash. Scheduled to ordain the newest class of rabbis and cantors the next morning, Aaron’s death stunned many familiar with his passion for flying.

Rabbi Panken visited Temple Shalom as our scholar-in-residence a few years ago, providing an opportunity for some of you to learn with him. During my tenure as a student, Rabbi Panken served as the Dean of the New York campus. More than that, Aaron inspired my rabbinate as my teacher, mentor and friend. I first met Rabbi Panken when he attended my entrance interview for rabbinical school. After it was over, he offered to walk me out and we chatted for quite some time about our shared passions for the sciences. I believe that he played a key role in my acceptance.

Travelling to the New York area, I attended his funeral, along with thousands of others who came to mourn his death. The stories shared that day by his friends and family reaffirmed the mensch that I had known. And, those memories revealed that Rabbi Panken possessed the decisiveness to change lanes without unnecessary delay.

Growing up on the Upper West Side, Rabbi Panken decided in his childhood to learn more about his Jewish identity. Young Aaron walked into the Lincoln Square synagogue, and asked to enroll in religious school. Aaron saw an opportunity to change, unphased that he chose an Orthodox shul. When the Cantor of the congregation called his parents, they took the cue and decided to join a congregation closer to their practice – Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

The lane changes kept coming. Most electrical engineers head out to Silicon Valley. Not Aaron Panken, who went from Johns Hopkins to Hebrew Union College to study for the rabbinate. After a serving as an assistant rabbi, Aaron decided he wanted to go back to school, earn his PhD and teach at Hebrew Union College. So, he changed lanes again, reaching not only his goal of teaching, but becoming Dean of the New York campus, and later President of the College.

Our High Holy Day liturgy underscores the unpredictable nature of life through the powerful Unataneh Tokef. Reading that litany of outcomes instills in us that we possess only limited control.

Rabbi Panken wrote one of the study texts around this prayer in our Rosh Hashanah prayerbook. It reads, “Our actions help us live in such a way that when we suffer life’s darkest depredations, we will always have ways of coping with them. Our actions may not change the ultimate outcome one iota, but they alter our attitude, bolster our ability to withstand challenges, help us handle unavoidable misfortunes better, and see life’s value amid chaos and destiny.”

Man plans, and God laughs. No matter our plans, life remains unpredictable. Plans unfulfilled linger as lost possibilities. At the same time, Rabbi Panken teaches that when we follow through on our plans, when we take advantage of openings to change lanes, and experience life to its fullest, we offset the losses. Life is what we make of it – and only we have the power to choose the lane that we travel. As the sages say, “Hayom Katar, v’hamalacha m’rubah” – the day is short and the work is great. We only have limited time to accomplish what we will in life.

A new year has arrived. After reviewing 5778, we feel motivated to change lanes, and possess the courage to embark on a new path. Signaling our intent to change, we do so into a clear and open lane with the support of those who know us and love us. Knowing that opportunity does not wait, we plan to act decisively. Yes, that first move out of the lane is the most daunting. Turning the wheel, accelerating, committing to change.

Start this new year right - begin the year by eating a frog.

I am not advocating for abandoning kashrut.

Rather, I have in mind the wisdom of noted author and humorist Mark Twain said, “Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you for the rest of the day.” By Twain’s reckoning, if one takes on the most dreaded item first thing in the morning, then everything else you encounter that day will seem that much better.

Make a significant lane change, a difficult choice, without delay. Endure the challenge of change early in the year, eat your frog, and the rest of the year will only taste better.

Life is our highway, with an onramp that we turned onto with our arrival in the world. Tonight, we turn on our blinkers and discover the lane that will return us to the right path.

May the lane we chose bring us to a year of blessing, hope and joy.

Ken Yehi Ratzon

May it be God’s Will.