

Dear Congregation,

As I start to write this, I am waiting for the results of my mother's heart surgery. I tried praying but after thirty seconds of my own words, I ran out of things to say. I mean really what else is there to say other than "please let my mom be okay." I tried praying the fixed liturgy, as I do most days, but I couldn't concentrate. Meditation had only slightly better results. So I started writing. Keep my mind off of it, so to speak. Be productive (as if productivity matters right now).

My mother has a chronic heart condition and this is her third heart surgery. Last time, two Passovers ago, she had a triple valve repair/replace. Compared to that, this will hopefully be a breeze, but I'm more upset this time. Why?

Maybe last time I was just in severe denial. Quite possible. Or maybe I have just blocked out the memories of how terrified I was last time.

But also, I think it's in part because last time I had warning. The surgery was planned for months. Various doctors were consulted. We had a game plan. We could pretend like we were in control.

This time, it was a total shock. My dad just called me out of the blue. I couldn't believe it.

My sister and I started texting furiously. Good adult children that we are, we figured out how to both see her before the surgery, while passing in the night, and making sure my dad wasn't alone for the next 72 hours. My sister grabbed a train. I stayed home to wait to see my son, Gus, for a few hours and calmly explain to him why I was going to be gone for a day or two. I then packed a bag and proceeded to live out of my car for the next four days.

So there I was, driving much too late. I know how to get to my parents' house in my sleep, which is good, because I was sleepy and anxious and distracted, a bad combination. So I was using the GPS just in case.

Then I heard it. My GPS said, "make a U-turn." I almost did as instructed. Thankfully I had the presence of mind to think, "No, I'm on the entrance ramp to the highway. That would be dangerous. The GPS is wrong."

Life is so strange. We delude ourselves into thinking we're in control, but we never are. We can control ourselves, but nothing else.

All day, every day, we hear a GPS in our brain that says, "turn here...go there...call your mother...she's cute...that reminds me, I need a present for my partner's birthday...but

she is cute...never mind...where's my checkbook...I'm hungry...I should eat some vegetables...I'd rather eat ice cream...what a beautiful sunset..."

Sometimes the internal GPS is the yester hatov (the good inclination) telling us, "call your mother...give a gift...appreciate a beautiful sunset..."

Sometimes the internal GPS is the yester hara (the evil inclination) talking, saying "she's cute...where's my checkbook...I'm hungry..."

Sometimes the GPS completely malfunctions and tells us to "make a U-turn" on the highway entrance ramp.

Sometimes the GPS is God screaming "turn around...do you hear me...I said turn around, fast, now!"

But in the normal rush and tumble of life we're lucky if we're conscious of half of what we hear. We're too busy, hungry, selfish, and distracted to notice.

It takes something dramatic to make us remember what is important.

God doesn't want us to wait until there's a heart condition or a car crash to notice what matters. That's why we have the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. The shofar is our GPS. "Make a U-turn," it says.

Finally, the doctor came out to say that my mom is fine and everything went well. So well, in fact, that they didn't even have to do much of the repairs they had planned. She'll be awake in an hour or so, and we can see her. The doctor thinks she'll go home tomorrow. And all seems right with the world.

So right with the world, in fact, that all those prayers that were stuck before are flowing now. Suddenly, I could concentrate. I could pray a *tefilla* that didn't sound like us five years old. I remembered that I had intended to give some *tzedakah* I had forgotten about. Later, when I went to my mom's room, I noticed that her roommate was alone and needed some help. I spent a good ten minutes helping my mom's roommate. When the nurse came back, she looked confused and asked me which patient was my mother. "She is," I said, gesturing to the other curtain, "but Mrs. X was very thirsty."

Teshuvah, tefilla, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zerah.

Repentance, prayer, and righteousness causes the evil of the decree to pass.

All the teshuvah, tefilla and tzedakah in the world won't help us control what we can't control. But they will help us control ourselves and that makes all the difference. Know what matters.

No, I'm not actually this focused and poetic while my mom is in surgery. Most of this was written days later. But I did start this while she was in surgery (and stared at a blank screen trying to figure out the point of my GPS story for a long time). Most importantly, the story, "make a U-turn" and all, is entirely true.

My partner, Mira, our son, Gus, and I wish you all a shana tovah u'metukah – a year of goodness and sweetness.

May you be inscribed for good - gmar tuv,
Rabbi Green