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Everything I ever needed to know, I learned from a moped

Jewish tradition has always valued giving credit where it is due and so, in keeping with the values of *b'shem omro* (the one who said it), I'd like to let you know that the format of what follows was inspired by a sermon I heard about many years ago. I arrived at my congregation in Denver two years after their long time Rabbi, Raymond Zwerin, had retired. He is a remarkable teacher and made a strong impression on the congregation and upon me. While I came to town too late to have heard it myself, this sermon is written in homage to him.

My relationship with scooters began at a fairly young age. We've all got those photos from our early years that blur the lines between actual memory and memories built on images somewhat after the event itself but, there is a photo floating around of me sitting on my grandfather's lap while he is perched on his scooter. It was one of those really old mopeds that had pedals to pump like a bicycle and he looks so happy. I was probably about six or seven years old and, while I cannot say that I recall the ride itself, the picture has planted within me a powerful and positive relationship with mopeds.

I rode mopeds belonging to friends a couple times while in my teen years but then flash forward several years and I am on my honeymoon with Julie. We celebrated our wedding by running off to an island in the Caribbean and had a great time. One day, we decided to rent a moped to explore the island. It was the first time that I had somebody else on a moped with me. She sat behind me holding tightly to my torso and I knew that I was in love and felt a powerful responsibility to keep her safe. My protection of this other person would last beyond the length of our 4-hour rental, it was to extend the length of our journey together. That day taught me: As we scooted around the island, we found ourselves halfway up a pretty steep hill. It was a tiny scooter and, the further we climbed, the harder the little engine chugged – and the slower we went. I found myself thinking, "I hope we can, I hope we can!" Well, we couldn't and I felt no small amount of shame as I had to ask my beautiful new bride to climb off our scooter and walk up the hill behind me. At least I knew better than to put into words what we

were both thinking which is, that she needed to lighten the load! And I remember that moment getting to the top of the hill. I knew that what I found on her face when I looked back carried a lot of import and, what I saw there was great laughter. I knew at that point, that we were going to be a good team.

And then, several years later I arrived at my new community in Denver and learned that my community was naturally associating me with their beloved Rabbi emeritus. We vaguely resembled each other. We had similar humor. Some of our skill sets overlapped and then I found out that he was well-known to have ridden a scooter! The congregation already thought of their rabbi riding a scooter and that made it a lot easier for Julie to convince me that we should get one, too! I did my research. She picked out the styling and the color. I found the seller. And, we bought it. It was incredibly fun and I rode that scooter almost year round for the five years we lived there. We put more than 3000 miles on the odometer (and, I only lived 3 miles from the Temple!).

Many afternoons, we would have no particular destination but Julie and I would climb on just to take a pleasure drive. I didn't feel too guilty about the carbon footprint of those drives because the thing gets great gas mileage. Even my mother loved climbing onto the back and riding around the neighborhood with me. Then, when Julie shared with me the news that we were expecting our son, it was time for her to stop riding and to find myself a life insurance agent. When our time in Denver drew to a close, there really was no conversation about the scooter. I ran the gas tank dry, drained the fluids, took out the battery and tightened down the mirrors for transit to our new home in Connecticut.

We got here and I got busy. The scooter stayed in the garage. Two summers later, I realized that it was still sitting there in the garage. And then, four summers later, and it still had not seen the light of day. "I must be getting too old for this thing. I guess it's time to sell it." I brought home some gas in a can, gave it an oil change, had to buy a new battery and lubricated the whole thing. I took it for a test drive to make sure it was working well before listing it for sale and right there was my mistake. I fell in love with it all over again. I realized that the

scooter had a few things to teach me about myself and this morning I've broken them down into seven brief lessons for you.

Let's start with the **first lesson**: turning. Going in a straight line is rather easy. You simply sit up straight and enjoy the ride. But, when it's time to change course, a commitment is required. It really is a bit counterintuitive – we spend our earliest days learning to ride a bike just trying to maintain a center of balance and stay vertical. Then, against all intuition, we find it is necessary to lean ourselves into the turn and to bring the bike off balance. Trusting that the laws of nature, gravity and centripetal forces will do what they've always done and that we'll come out of it on the other side. To borrow some of the language of Sheryl Sandberg, when you lean in, you'll be surprised at how effectively you can get where you want. When we take chances, step slightly outside our safety zone and put our whole self into the effort, we'll succeed. The further you lean, the more the fear, the greater the exhilaration and then, afterward, a feeling like you've just done something really remarkable and brave.

Of course, when you're on the moped, leaning too far into a turn will be disastrous. Not only will you fail to execute the turn, you'll crash and won't even be able to continue the ride. One need not be exceedingly observant to see that we are experiencing a bit of a problem when it comes to opinions in our country these days. We disagree on our political affiliation, feelings about Israel, beliefs about God, race relations and even our feelings about sports teams. The problem is that we're upset that the rest of the country doesn't share our opinion. It has grown so bad that we find it difficult to even speak to those who are on the other side. We're feeling brave when we speak powerfully about one of these issues and the exhilaration leaves us wanting more but also makes it difficult to listen to the other. Most of us are leaning too far to the extremes in our opinions and social commentators, better informed than I, are asking whether our country can weather this rough ride.

The second lesson from the Spirituality of a Moped is to always use your Turn Signal. You need not raise your hand: Who sitting here finds him/herself frustrated when the car in front of you decides that their plans to make a lane change or a turn are none of your business? This is a rhetorical question because I know the answer is "all of you." We've all seen the

bumper sticker which reads “forget world peace, visualize using your turn signal!” When I am headed down High Ridge with a car to close on my tail, if I intend to turn into a neighborhood, it is in my own best interest to not only use my turn indicator but also my hand signal. The driver behind me needs to know my plans. I know it sounds like I’m reading from a training pamphlet at the DMV but the indicator lights on a vehicle are the clearest way we have to communicate to others that we intend to execute a change in our condition. It is the way that we let others know what’s going on inside our head.

Judaism, has always built into itself the insistence on interconnectedness. We pray as a group. We eat in community. We support each other as family. We don’t see the individual as an island. Our families need to understand what we are thinking and feeling. Our coworkers and community members deserve some information about our inner intent. And, to some extent, if we have not signaled our intention and we get hit from behind by those who thought we were carrying on just fine, whose fault is it really? A policeman will give the driver in back the ticket but, if we did not signal, we know we bear responsibility, too. Communication with those in our lives cannot be overvalued.

Lesson three. There is no question about wearing your helmet. Obviously, there is the safety of the helmet but, along with that comes a mindfulness. As I slide it over my head and the sounds around me grow a bit muffled. I tighten the strap under my chin and lower the face shield, all of it prepares me for an experience that will require my fullest attention. I join traffic and I drive more defensively: expecting the worst from others and, then when it presents, I am less surprised by it and able to handle it more confidently.

When asked about my choice to wear my kippah I usually explain it in terms of a mindfulness tool. It keeps me aware as I move through my day that I am in interaction with others. Well, the kippah does me little good on the moped. Rather, I put on a helmet, and I similarly change my mindfulness. Maybe you’ve heard it said that the difference between a schlemiel and a schlimazel is that the Schlemiel spills her soup. And the schlimazel is the one the soup spills on. There is no place for a schlemiel nor a schlimazel on two wheels. The stakes are too high. And, as long as we’re at it, I should remind you that your life insurance premiums

should be paid up. Because, if you are realistic about what might happen to you in life, on or off the moped, then you realize there are responsibilities that are greater than yourself. There are people, projects, pets and God all who rely on you to do what you can to be responsible.

You might have heard me mention all the self-absorbed drivers out there. Bashing the drivers around here is a favorite past time of all of us but **Lesson 4** is to remember that there are some great people on the road with you. It used to be long ago, that when the driver next to you rolled down his window and gave you that weird circular signal that obviously meant he wanted you to roll down your window, he would probably ask you some question about the area. He would assume you were a local, and would ask you for directions or a recommendation. In recent years, GPS has kept us pretty-well sealed up from the others around us. Google ensures we don't need to ask questions of other humans anymore and so now, when the driver next to me wants to speak with me, my first assumption is that he wants to criticize something. But, that has not been my experience when riding a shiny orange scooter with a smile plastered across my face. I'm always surprised how many people roll down their windows or yell to me from the sidewalk while I'm idling at a light to let me know how fun it looks or to ask how many miles it gets to the gallon (by the way, the answer is about 90). There are so many people who tell me that they used to have a moped themselves or that they have always wanted one. They ask how fast it will go and, beyond these folks, are the multitudes more who I catch looking at me with a smile on their face. Rabbi Akiva tells us that we should "קבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות" - receive each person you encounter with a pleasant countenance." In other words, begin each interaction with the assumption that it will go well and, there's a much better chance that it will. There are still plenty of drivers out there who cause me to gnash my teeth, but, when I'm on the scooter, it is a little easier to behave the way Rabbi Akiva suggests.

I know that there are safer ways to get from point A to point B so allow me to address the risks for a moment. I know that emergency room personnel call them donor-cycles rather than motorcycles. I know that EMS workers call them brain buckets rather than helmets. But I also know that there are some important benefits to be gained by taking small, calculated risks in life. Those who ski know that there is a decent chance you may get hurt. Those who white

water raft understand that the risk is a tradeoff for an adrenaline-rich experience. Everything in life comes with decisions. You don't need me to tell you what life would look like if you tried to minimize every risk out there. Did you know there were more than 32,000 deaths on the roadways last year – if you were being *really* careful, you would never put the keys in your car ignition. Did you know that the 747 weighs in at about 900K pounds – something *that* heavy most certainly should not be put in the air with 660 people aboard – If you were making rational decisions, you would never climb on an airplane. Last year, there were 13,286 hearts that stopped beating because a bullet entered the body in the United States. If you were to minimize all risks in life, you'd stay home where its safe. You would never walk down the street in a crowded city. Even going to the places that are supposed to keep us alive can be deadly! Anti-biotic-resistant super bugs are making it rather risky to be in a hospital so, to reduce the chance of picking up C-Diff or MRSA, you should definitely not go anywhere near an urgent care facility. And these are just the physical risks! And I don't have time to even get started on the emotional risks! If you are going to live as safely as possible, that would mean no skiing, no white water rafting, no cars, airplanes, walking down the street or going to the hospital. Doesn't sound like much of a life to me!?!

And so, to my point, **Lesson 5** is that, if one is going to choose a mode of transportation with heightened risk but with heightened benefits, one had better smile. When I am scooting around town, one of the rules I established for myself is that there must be a smile on my face at all times. I have realized that the most reliable indicator that my mind is wandering is when my face is not showing joy. I force the distraction out of my mind spread the smile back across my face and enjoy the liberating feel of the wind in my beard! But, a note of caution: be careful not to smile too widely - you are likely to end up with bugs in your teeth.

Lesson six: Know your power. Mopeds come in a variety of sizes and configurations. Some have engines as large as 600 cc's and others as small as 49 cc's. There are advantages and disadvantages to each and I know that some choose the smallest engines because it allows them to park on the sidewalk. This comes in handy when you need to make a quick stop at Ridgeway! But, it also means your top speed will hover somewhere around 23 mph. I chose a scooter with 150 cc's. With that added power I can comfortably do 45 mph on a flat

straightaway and I have even seen 55 mph with a slight downhill and a good tailwind! There are times, when I'm turning out of my neighborhood onto High Ridge during rush hour. I *could* wait an hour but quickly admit that that God's not going to clear traffic for me. So, when a reasonably safe break in traffic presents, I know that I'm going to have to thread my way into the flow and take my place amongst the other cars confidently in order to make a safe maneuver. Hesitation or excessive caution would become a liability for me. Knowing that the throttle will provide me reliable power gives me the ability to trust my decision.

Our tradition could not be more clear about humans and our Divine nature. We believe that we were formed בצלם אלהים, with divinity a part of us and therefore, there is much that is within our power. Sometimes, I feel a bit like the fellow in the flood standing on his roof turning away the rescuers because he tells them, "God will save me." When we look around the world and we see such challenge and adversity, like God, we have the ability to make a difference. This is the moment in which we transform ourselves into partners with the Power of the Universe and begin to establish the world we know to be possible.

And finally, lesson **Number Seven** is: know when to leave the moped in the garage. Planning ahead on moped mornings involves checking my schedule to see how far I need to travel and the weather to see what the meteorologists are guessing. Obviously, I'm not going to choose the moped as my transportation on a day that I will be visiting somebody hospitalized in New York City or on a day with an 80% chance of thunderstorms. But, more than that, I'm not going to choose the moped if I have just had a bad night's sleep or if I'm going to be out late for meetings or if I am in the midst of the High Holidays and have a thousand details floating around in my mind. All of those conditions would lead to the moped being a poor choice and, as much as I love it – as much as I get out of being on it – I have to turn away. Hopping on the bike, in any of those situations would be the easy or lazy thing to do. Exerting the effort necessary to make a different choice is much tougher which brings us to the work we're here to tackle today. There are behaviors you have been telling yourself need to change for a long time now. There are choices you're continuing to make in your relationships that are not serving your best interest and you know should be modified. There are habits you've been trying to break and you keep putting off telling yourself, "I deserve this indulgence." These are the

choices everyone one of us have been making that are the easier way forward. They exercise the laziest part of ourselves and we know that we're really overdue in making a change. Our machzor for Rosh Hashanah asks us to confront these obstacles – these opportunities using the harsh language of אשמנו and the על חט - unable to escape the damning imprecation, we must admit we've been less than we could have been? Rabbi Hillel asked it differently of us: אם לא עכשיו, אימתי - If not now, when? As I've said before, you're sitting here...You've already made that effort. Spend the next few minutes thinking about leaving behind the easy choices, the ones that offer the short term but short sighted pleasures – like my riding the scooter on a day that I should not – and see if you've got the appetite to make that change.

At this point, I feel like I could print up a poster and make a fortune: Lean into the Turns, always use your turn signal, always wear your helmet, give the people around you the benefit of the doubt, don't forget to smile, trust in your power and know when to leave the moped in the garage. Everything I ever needed to know, I learned from a moped.