**Recalculating….**

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**Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa**

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I appreciate the warm welcome that I have received here in Ottawa at KBI. Thank you.

Have you ever been misdirected by your GPS?

The Global Positioning System provides location and time information anywhere on Earth. But the first time I used a GPS, I got lost en route to the Ottawa River for white water rafting. GPS depends on us to input the correct information. It helps to know approximately where and how you want to go in order to confirm the route suggested by the GPS.

I miss the calm voice that simply stated “recalculating” which replaced the agitated voice of someone who loves me saying, “I can’t believe you missed the turn” or “why did you decide to take THAT road?”

I appreciate when GPS technology works and my car tells me, “you have arrived at your destination,” but is that always true in life?  I think of the Paul Simon song:

Slip slidin' away

You know the nearer your destination

The more you're slip slidin' away

God only knows

God makes his plan

The information's unavailable

To the mortal man

We're working our jobs

Collect our pay

Believe we're gliding down the highway

When in fact we're slip slidin' away.

Sometimes, we move ahead on GPS and fail to consult an old fashioned map to make sure we are, indeed, going in the direction we want. We may be “slip slidin’ away” from where we really want to be.

Do you ever feel lost? Wonder where your desired destination might be? What would it mean to recalculate and arrive?

What makes you anxious? Jerry Seinfeld once observed, “According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy”.

Thirty years ago, the fears of grade school children were: animals, dark rooms, high places, strangers, and loud noises. Today, kids are afraid of divorce, nuclear war, cancer, pollution, and being attacked in the street.  Our fears define our society and our lives.

My decision to come to KBI — following a partial retirement — after conversations with Judah Silverman and Victor Rabinovich — has left me excited and anxious, enthusiastic and uncertain. Just the way a student feels upon first entering university. Similar to the way some couples feel before their *huppah*. Or new parents bringing their baby home. Or people starting a new job. Or mourners trying to feel their way forward in a world without their loved one.

During these Days of Awe, I’m exploring life journeys, where our lives are taking us and how Torah might help us find direction; where God is in this process and what our ultimate destination might be.

When Avraham is called, “לך לך ~ go forth,” he embarks on a journey to an unknown destination, to “go to the place that I shall show you.” The future is unknown and uncertain. Most of the truly important decisions we make take us to places we don’t really know. We must constantly re-evaluate, recalibrate and recalculate.

Avraham went with his father and family from Ur. On the way to Canaan, they settled in northern Iraq, the city of Haran. From there, God calls Avram to fulfil his father’s intention and journey to Canaan.

Parents initiate our journeys. They bring us into the world and direct us, usually on the path they had been travelling. When God says *Lech lekha* it might mean “Make the journey your own.” Take ownership yourself.

Terah went of his own decision. Avram does so at God’s command. That changes the intent and meaning. As Rabbi Rachel Anisfeld writes, “*The journey, though physically the same, becomes entirely new and holy. …Like a [berakhah] before the performance of a mitzvah, God’s command transforms an ordinary action, the taking of a journey, into a special, holy one…”*

Are we such travellers? Is there a spiritual GPS to make our life journey more meaningful, even holy?

Avraham and Sarah keep walking. Part of what makes us human is our ability to walk upright. We are homo erectus. Our ability to traverse long distance uses the earliest and most basic human technology. As we walk, we step up and forward, one leg on the ground and one in the air. Perhaps that is why Hillel said that he could teach the Torah on one foot. Torah is acquired as we walk.

The Hebrew words for Jewish law is *halakhah*, a path, suggesting that it is heading somewhere. We are taught to speak and study the words of Torah “ובלכתך בדרך ~ when you walk on your way.” With Torah as a map, in the midst of a high tech world, we can take another look at where we are heading. Think of walking Jewish as a set of practices that orient us on a path for life.

The Hasidic teacher Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known as the Sefat Emet taught that the human being is defined by walking.

We “must always try to walk up, stepping up level by level. At all times, we must renew our soul and religious direction.” (5656)

כי אדם נקרא מהלך וצריך לעולם לילך ממדריגהלמדריגה

‘ולכן צריכין בכל עת לחדש דרכים בעבודת ה.

The Christian theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, uses the image of pilgrimage for a life journey. “… the past [must] be intentionally carried forward … [otherwise] we become aimless and wandering individuals instead of pilgrims.” As we gather during these Days of Awe, we seek to transform ourselves from wandering individuals to a pilgrim people progressing to a redemptive future.

A tradition attributed to the Baal Shem Tov suggests that the stops in our people’s Wilderness journey from Egypt to the Land of Promise are mirrored in our lives. We proceed from birth—our personal exodus from the womb —until death ushers us in to ארץ החיים ~ the Land of Life, the spiritual counterpart of Eretz Yisrael.

At each stage, particularly when we falter, we may not know which way to turn or how to proceed, but the Torah teaches us that our journey is not over.

The great historian, Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi z”l, writes that only after we realize how anxious and fearful our ancestors were, we can begin to comprehend the significance and the method of their response.

The Bible describes the danger anticipated by the southern kingdom of Judah from the Babylonian invaders. Many abandoned the covenant of Abraham and Sarah.

But in the book of Jeremiah we find a “prototypical act of hope.” As the city was to be overrun by the Babylonians, the prophet was instructed by God to buy a field on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

*So I bought the field at Anatot …and put [the deed] in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Eternal of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (Jer 32: 9-15).*

An act of trust despite despair.

There were other times when hope prevailed over anxiety and despair. In the year 70, all of the major institutions of Jewish life were destroyed. Prophets — gone. Country — occupied. Revolt against Rome — crushed. Temple — destroyed. Yerushalmi observed: “The Jewish people faced… the deepest despair… many succumbed…. [saying] ‘God is totally removed from us. We have no sacrifices. We have no way of communicating with God.’”

A small group, just beginning to call themselves rabbis, did not succumb. No Temple, no sacrifices. But Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, tells Jews of the generation of destruction and future generations: Tefillah. Tzedakah. Teshuvah. Hesed. He reframed the Biblical form of divine-human contact, transforming ritual and ethics into a spiritual meeting place.

“This… ability to rise from the ruins, to recreate, to transpose values into new channels, to achieve a future where no future seems possible any more … is one of the themes… that run through Jewish history. …This capacity to sustain hope… is an extraordinary and mysterious thing.”

Spain. March 1391. Anti-Jewish rioting broke out. Thousands were killed, neighbourhoods were torched and a wave of conversions began — estimates range up to 200,000 individuals. In 1480, after almost 100 years of oppressive laws and papal decrees, an Inquisition was instituted to investigate crypto-Jews. August 1492. All Jews were expelled from Spain.

Spanish and Portuguese Jews who made their way to Amsterdam contributed to the establishment a new world of freedom of commerce and conscience. Refugees who reached the Land of Israel helped to develop a world of mystical ritual and faith, law and practice, homilies and holiness. Jews responded to loss by the daily affirmations of life.

Jewish migration was not only to find economic opportunities. We sought societies that were tolerant — what Pierre Birnbaum calls a "geography of hope” — and we framed the conditions of life to give our dispersion and defeat meaning. That is why so many of us are disturbed by contemporary developments. International instability and bellicose nationalism have never been good for the Jews — or anyone else.

Jews developed a "midrash of history” that allowed us to burrow “beneath the surface of events to find inner meaning or even invisible triumphs in the wake of what otherwise might seem to be examples of defeat.” Although the Mashi’ah didn’t arrive, we were able to foster “interim Jewish hopes” to sustain us. Our liturgy and ritual were “sources and salves” allowing for continued resilience.

In the Warsaw ghetto, Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum reframed the traditional ideal of martyrdom, *Kiddush Hashem*.  Under the Nazis, he stressed that Jews should seek *kiddush hahayyim*, sanctification of life.

Previously our enemies sought Jewish souls and we gave our bodies. The Nazis wanted body and soul. Resistance meant preserving, as much as possible, life and dignity.

Following the Shoah, the determination to establish a Jewish state became more imperative. This was an instance of sanctifying life. Despite the dreams of some, Israel is not a proto-messianic kingdom. It is a nation-state with acclaimed accomplishments and constant challenges. Its creation and continued existence is a *kiddush hahayyim*.

Part of my anxiety is that Israel is terribly fractured among various ideological and religious camps, different ethnic tribes, and socio-economic gaps. My hope is that the moderate middle and the soft right may foster a new political dynamic that emphasizes national unity and solidarity.

Yerushalmi noted that “[Usually] we read history of the victors. Jews… were defeated; in their defeat, were able to articulate what they felt and how they responded. And …in their defeat, did not admit to being inferior. On the contrary, [they] felt superior to those who had defeated them.”

Think of the power of the three Ts:  *teshuvah*- turning inward, *tefilah*- turning to God, and *tzedakah*- turning to others. Through these daily acts of spiritual service, we recalculate, regain perspective and renew our daily journeys.

Atul Gwande wrote about the challenge of incremental medicine — long-term care and support of patients — in distinction to intensive, one-off medical intervention.  Each has value, but we often valourize the one-off, forgetting how significant the slow and steady medical care can be.

Chris Turner, an environmental activist, also directed his attention away from large-scale solutions to climate change to seek out small-scale pioneers of environmental sustainability. Interestingly, he called his search The Geography of Hope.

As we face the reality of increased anti-semitism and racism, we must acknowledge our personal anxiety and fear. But we cannot succumb. We must stand with dignity and self-respect. Seek legal redress and demonstrate moral principle.

Don’t despair, dig in and find projects that can make a difference. Let those who stand for inclusion and tolerance know of your support. Encourage the best of us.

Howard Zinn in *The Optimism of Uncertainty*, writes:

*To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic.  … If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places… where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act… To live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

Do what you can do, again and again, like ritual, and you will accomplish more than you can imagine.

Tomorrow, the shofar will sound, saying “recalculating,” calling us to reconsider where we want to go and how to get there. May the blasts of the shofar, the teachings of Torah, and our daily mitzvot get us to our desired destination.

Best wishes for a new year where you reach your desired destinations in good health and with many blessings.

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