

“THIS IS WHEN YOU SHOULD TURN”

SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

By Rabbi Tom Heyn for Congregation *Shir HeHarim*, Brattleboro, VT

Driving as much as I do, I often rely on a GPS, which I affectionately refer to as “Mrs. Garmin.” If I ever take a wrong turn, she doesn't scold me or make me feel incompetent. She just alerts me in a pleasant voice and says, “recalculating.” Not only does she get me where I need to go (well, most of the time), she teaches me an important lesson that seems particularly relevant during this time of year.

This month of September coincides almost exactly with the Hebrew month of Elul, a time for reflection and preparation for the Jewish New Year. It's a time to examine our lives and relationships, making sure we're on the right track -- or giving us the opportunity to return to it if we've gone astray. This notion of returning, known in Hebrew as teshuvah, is a major theme during Elul and continues through the High Holy Days. Teshuvah is like turning on the GPS, remembering where it is we wanted to go in the first place, then calculating the most direct path we can take to get there.

Our tradition provides us with appropriate technologies for this season, three of which I'll mention here. First is the shofar (ram's horn), which is traditionally blown throughout the entire month of Elul at the conclusion of the weekday morning prayer service. Its rousing call prompts us in the morning to wake up and begin thinking about the directional adjustments we want to make in the coming year. See if you can find a way to hear the shofar's call once a day over the next few weeks (even if only on YouTube.)

Another tradition for this season is the daily recitation of Psalm 27, which begins with the words “God is my light and my helper, whom shall I fear?” This psalm is traditionally recited every day from Rosh Hodesh Elul (the beginning of the month) through the middle of Sukkot in mid-October. Recognizing that change is needed can be a source of fear for some, but beginning the day with this psalm is like hearing a guiding voice say, “now is when you should turn.” There's something very reassuring about that.

It's worth noting that Psalm 27 also expresses a desire to dwell in God's house “all the days of my life,” but the verse doesn't give us the address. Instead, it suggests that our intended destination is not always in some other place or some future time, it can also be a state of mind to strive for daily. As you travel whatever road you're on, even when you feel lost, it helps to know that the destination is always before you.

One other aid for teshuvah recommended for this season is the practice of seeking forgiveness. Of course we are encouraged to improve our relationship with God, whatever that may mean for us. But Jewish tradition also urges us to once again begin the work of improving our relationships with others so that we can all move forward into the next year. Our rabbis tell us we can resolve many relationship issues during Elul by asking forgiveness for our wrong-doings. Not only should we be ready and willing to grant forgiveness to those who have harmed us, but also we should ask forgiveness from others we may have wronged. If we earnestly ask three times, our obligation to seek forgiveness is fulfilled, even if it is not granted by the person we asked.

As I avail myself of the aid and support our tradition recommends for this season, I am also mindful of an important lesson I learn from “Mrs. Garmin” every time I take a wrong turn. Especially when I need help, there is nothing to be gained from blaming oneself or others. We need only turn our attention to the most direct path that will help us get to our destination. As long as my focus is on where I want to go - - or better yet, the kind of person I want to be – there is no need for pettiness or fear. That's half the journey right there.

Now is the time for returning to the path our destination dictates. Jewish tradition makes available to us (and to the world!) distinctive and effective tools for engaging in this process. When used with proper intentionality, they can help us 'recalculate,' if you will, and turn ourselves once again in the right direction. With the help of these spiritual technologies and the support of a genuinely spiritual community, may you find yourself returning to the path that leads most directly to the destination you envision for yourself in the coming new year.

L'shana Tova,

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