

Rosh Hashanah Day I – Family Service
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JPS - The Jewish Positioning System

I spent a fair amount of time in the car this summer – 3000 miles worth of time. Many of you have shared the experience of a drive from Florida to the northeast, either as a kid in the backseat or as a driver up front. How anyone accomplished this feat before minivans and dvd players I have no idea. One other modern invention became the central metaphor to tie together a few ideas for this morning, and that is a gadget that many of you are also familiar with – the GPS, or global positioning system, which knows where you are, and even more powerfully, knows where you are going. Would that we could answer those questions so confidently on these holy days – it pretty well sums up our challenge. Where are you – and where are you going? How are you going to get there? What are you going to do if you hit a detour? And, not quite as critically, is there anywhere near this exit to get a decent tuna fish sandwich?

There is one thing I actually wish I could have turned off on the system. And that is the calculated time of arrival. At first this seemed like a great thing – using your expected average speed and distance to travel it would tell you what time you would get to your destination. What this became for me was two things: first, a challenge to try to shave a few minutes off of that time. Stop for lunch? Forget about it! We'll lose time! Grab a soda, we'll eat in the car. But worse than that, even after we limited time at rest stops, I realized there was nothing I could do to get to our destination any sooner than it told me I would get there. This was maddening because the illusion of control over our trip was removed from the equation. When you don't know what time you are supposed to get somewhere you can make a guess, you can convince yourself that Jacksonville isn't really half a days drive from Boca, that the New Jersey Turnpike has shaved off a few exits since your last trip, that Cape Cod is only an hour from Boston, not much farther now, not much farther now...And the estimated time of arrival was based on no traffic or other stops – with the 'arrival time' staring at me the whole trip, the message was clear – things could only get worse.

Even though I didn't like the predictability, that GPS contraption saved me from untold hours of wandering around, not to mention the very specific kind of angst that comes as the result of a driver – me – who refuses to ask for directions. It got me to thinking about a different kind of guide which I have not-so-ingeniously named the JPS – the Jewish Positioning System. This is not to be confused with the Jewish Publication Society or JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, or with JPS Communications, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Raytheon Company, which designs, manufactures and sells electronic hardware and software products that enhance the effectiveness of communications systems, which is what an "I'm Feeling Lucky" Google search for JPS brings up. I want to suggest a few points to program into your spiritual JPS in connection to some important goings on in our own Conservative movement.

A number of years ago Rabbi Harold Kushner, most famous for the book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, wrote a book called How Good Do We Have to Be? It is an exploration of the notion of perfection, and how when perfection is the goal one can only fall short. When perfection is the goal and we miss that mark, we feel guilty, and guilt leads to anger and resentment and all manner of negative things. Kushner's point is relevant on these holy days: change the goal. In the book he writes:

“Life is not a trap set for us by God, so that He can condemn us for failing. Life is not a spelling bee, where no matter how many words you have gotten right, if you make one mistake you are disqualified. Life is more like a baseball game, where even the best team loses one-third of its games and even the worst team has its days of brilliance. Our goal is not to go all year without ever losing a game. Our goal is to win more games than we lose, and if we can do that consistently enough, then when the end comes, we will have won it all. God does not expect us to be perfect as this is not part of human nature.”

The ‘Life is like a baseball game’ metaphor is one that I like – Rabbi David Wolpe points out that childhood actually ends when we realize that our dream of pitching for our favorite team is not going to happen. And it is certainly good and even healthy to remind ourselves on these days of teshuvah that we missed the mark last year and try as we might, plan as we might, pledge as we might – and we should do all of that - we are going to miss it again this year. But that admission is not, can we say it, the ballgame. There is a school of thought in Judaism which is regaining traction after a long hiatus in our corner of the Jewish world which says, basically, “not so fast.” It doesn't let us off with the ‘I'm only human’ defense. If one were to sum up the slogan of this particular approach to Jewish living, it would not be Kushner's *How Good do I Have to Be* but instead *How Good Can I Possibly Be?*

This school of thought was popularized in many eastern European Yeshivot beginning in the second half of the 19th century by a Rabbi named Yisrael Salanter. It is called *musar*, which is translated as “correction” or “instruction” but which has come to mean, more broadly, a way of life that includes steep introspection into the qualities of one's own soul, and how those qualities are expressed in our everyday interactions. Many rabbis rejected Salanter's efforts to include a class on character improvement on their students' schedules, thinking it was not as important as the study of Talmud and Jewish law. But Salanter won out – many detractors became not only proponents but avid practitioners of this way toward sharpening their ethical efforts and interpersonal relationships. *Musar* is a discipline, a practice, and an endless pursuit of the manifestation of the personality traits that indicate our acceptance of a goal beyond “I'm only human, what do you expect from me?”. It seeks to help us in realizing our highest spiritual potential, including, as one author writes about the goals of *musar*, an everyday experience infused with happiness, trust, and love.

I referred to this as a comeback – what do you know, another baseball term, the playoffs must be around the corner – in part because of the publication this year of two wonderful new books called *Everyday Holiness* and *A Responsible Life*, both written by authors who are representatives of the mainstream of the Jewish spectrum of which we are also a

part. One is named Alan Morinis, and the other is Ira Stone, who is a Conservative rabbi whose book receives a rave review from scholars from Yitz Greenberg to Elliot Dorff to Avivah Zornberg. I never heard the word musar until I entered a Yeshiva before starting rabbinical school. If you come from a more traditional Jewish background, you may have developed an association with the word that I also did when it was finally introduced to my Jewish vocabulary – instead of it being understood as a path toward ‘happiness, trust, and love’ I thought musar meant ‘you stink, you aren’t as bright as you think you are, and the gap between who you are and who you should be is so vast that you better rent a spaceship and pack a lunch.’

There is a school of musar that developed in eastern Europe that took this more strenuous approach to character education. It recognized a truth of personality improvement which is that it is not easy and it takes work. It’s also a recognition of the limited audience a sincere and spiritual approach to long-term growth and change is – Dr. Phil was not the first to recognize this. One rabbi, the Alter of Novarodok, a “musar master” noted “The problem with people is that they want to change overnight – and have a good night’s sleep that night, too.” His school sought to break the bond his students had to the approval of others by sending them into a bakery to ask for nails or a drugstore to ask for a watermelon. I once experienced a rabbi who said if you ever think that you are ever feeling a little pride in your knowledge, go rest your head on any shelf of books in this study hall – and compare what is in your head to what is on that shelf. That will be an effective cure for your pride.

This and other “tougher” kinds of musar is not what is catching on today, and it certainly is not the kind of musar I would imagine would grab a toehold in our relatively, how to say it, indulged community. The Musar that Stone and Morinis write about is kinder, gentler, and more reflective than the in-your-face kind that can be equally effective but which you can’t really expect anyone to buy a ticket for. The traits that musar seeks to improve are delineated – just hearing some of them wash over you gives a sense of the real-world nature or the challenge: humility, patience, gratitude, compassion, honor, simplicity, enthusiasm, generosity, trust, faith.

Let me give you a taste of this with a few characteristics of the trait that underpins the whole exercise, which is anavah, or humility. The Talmud itself notes that one who offers humility to God will be rewarded as if he had offered all the sacrifices in the world. The second thing to note about the musar version of humility is that one doesn’t have to be weak in order to be humble. Anavah is not about being a sucker, being meek, or feeling worthless. On the contrary, real humility requires self-esteem, just not an over-inflation of one’s own self-worth. As Morinis points out: being humble doesn’t mean being a nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be. This idea is taken to an extreme in a story about a well-known rabbi of the Jewish community of England. He was called upon to testify in court. At the trial, his lawyer asked him: “Is it true that you are the greatest living Jewish legal authority in Europe?” The rabbi replied, “Yes. That is true.” At which point the judge interjected and said, “Rabbi, is that not rather haughty on your part? I thought that your laws and ethics teach you to be

humble.” To which the rabbi responded, ‘I know we are taught to be humble. But what can I do? I am under oath.’”

A musar definition of humility is “limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others.’ In that space – at a trial, under oath, with a person’s fate perhaps hanging in the balance of that rabbi’s reputation, this embrace of a rather haughty depiction was a good fit. It is like the traffic cop who bravely stands in a busy intersection and controls the flow of cars with her authoritative control of the situation. She occupies a large space to do that effectively. When that same officer goes to her kid’s parent-teacher conference, she has to occupy a smaller space in order to behave appropriately. Musar gives us the perspective to say I’m not a god and I’m not a worm – and neither are you. I’m good at some things and so are you. Accepting that it is o.k. to be really good at what you are really good at, and sharing of those skills and talents in an appropriate and helpful way, is a trait that I would hope my own children absorb. It is a trait that the Jewish Spiritual Path of mussar endorses.

So musar is a recently uncovered piece of the foundation of a special approach to living beautifully and fully, and I want to conclude with the reintroduction of the bedrock on which even that special discipline rests. Last year in this forum I spoke at some length about the Conservative movement, solicited your responses, and was heartened at the continued dedication to and energy for the presence of a movement that prides itself on a centrist ideology, with space under its tent for all who seek the meaning of Judaism in a way that is relevant both to our history and to the environment in which we find ourselves. Last year at this time we did not know what the newly appointed Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary would make his first priority in terms of articulating the message of our sometimes misunderstood Conservative movement. Now we do. The theme is mitzvah.

Unlike the most common understanding of mitzvah as good deed, it is actually quite a bit more than that. A mitzvah, a commandment, seeks to increase the space that Jewish life and living takes up in our consciousness and in our everyday lives. It says that there are certain things that we do because we want to, other things we do because we have to, and things we don’t do because our tradition teaches us that certain boundaries of behavior are non-negotiable. It is an interesting and powerful concept to launch a chancellorship with and it will be equally interesting to see how it is received. The very notion of mitzvah is so simple that every Hebrew school student knows what it is but so rich and critical to our mission that it is a building block at the very foundation of our tradition. It flies in the face of our ‘do what feels right’ society and instead insists that to squeeze the most meaning out of our lives we are called on to “do what is right”.

I am happy about the resurrection of mainstream musar in that it teaches us that who we are is in large part defined by how we treat our own souls, and that if our souls are in a state of continual development how that leads us to relate to one another with greater understanding, patience, and an appropriate but not self-negating amount of humility. I applaud the new Chancellor for reminding us that our mission is bound up in our understanding that the success or failure of our enterprise is based on whether, how, and

when we put God at the center of our attempts to succeed as a community, and I look forward to seeing where the discussion, and our participation in it, leads over the near and long term future.

Last year at this time we entered our desired destination into our personal JPS systems. Over the course of the year we have been caught in the traffic of busy-ness, we have experienced the gridlock of unproductive stress, we have hit unforeseen speed bumps and potholes and worse that life has thrown at us which have threatened to jar us from our path. On Yom Kippur before Yizkor we will visit some of the aftermath of the worst of those moments. But Rosh Hashanah is a day of coronation, of sincere but triumphant celebration that the calendar has turned a page, right on time. We enter our destination for next Rosh Hashanah right now, guided on our route by the kindness taught by the tradition of musar and the commitments we are called on to live by our tradition of mitzvot. We indicate through our promises and our prayers that our deepest desire is that our route will be reasonably smooth, meaningful, and fulfilling, and that God will be with us, celebrating our achievements and supporting us in our disappointments. We pray to the God we seek to draw closer to in the coming year (from Machzor Hadash): Dear God, Fill us with the pride Which will keep us from self-humiliation, but purge us of the pride which leads to self-exaltation. Remind us that we are only human so that we may be most human. Keep us mindful of our littleness so that we may strive for true greatness. Help us to see how dependent we are upon You and upon one another. May we fulfill the teaching of Your prophet: To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

Shanah tovah.