

YK KN 5770 GPS and Reacting
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Gmar hatimah tovah – may you be sealed for a good year.

When I first moved to town, I seemed to get lost a bit. The lack of street signs, the streets with changing names. After the holidays that year, a member of our congregation said, “you know I should buy you a GPS device.” I turned down this generous offer, as I wanted to learn for myself how to get around. Well, this summer I broke down and finally got one.

Once I hooked it up, I typed in an address and voila it brought up the route. I looked for supermarkets and gas stations; it could find the closest and even, the cheapest one!

Wow.

The voice on mine is a calm woman’s voice. What’s nice about her is that she is very forgiving – often I will make a mistake and miss a turn or turn at the wrong place, - she simply says: “Recalculating.” And then she comes up with a new route, sometimes that means making a u-turn and going back, but usually it means that she finds a new way for me to go and everything is all right.

Sometimes, I want to go a different way deliberately. In these cases, she reveals no negative feelings – I sometimes feel guilty that I am not taking her suggested route, but she is never angry, she simply recalculates in the same voice she always uses and helps me find my way.

The ability of the GPS voice to stay calm in traffic jams or with incompetent drivers is aided by their non-humanness; it teaches us a good lesson about how to not react.

This Yom Kippur I want us all to think about how we react to stimuli and situations around us and how we can improve.

Reacting too quickly is the source of much of the pain in the world – people get into an argument and react without thinking. Turn on the news any evening and we hear of a shooting, an act of violence or aggression that happened in “the heat of the moment.”

This happens in our own homes – a parent reacts too strongly to a child’s behavior, a child overreacts to a parent or siblings jump on each other too quickly.

I see this all the time in our community. One person feels slighted by another and writes a long tirade in an email, attacking the other person. Often, only to regret it the next day.

This is not just a Jewish problem – it occurs in all communities and in our society all the time. Watch a tennis match - see how Serena Williams reacted to a line call in her last US Open match. Politicians screaming “You lie” to the President.

Countries do it as well – these responses can move the world closer to conflagration.

Why does all this happen? Well, from an evolutionary biological perspective, a quick reaction was often helpful. It could save you from the attacking bear – perhaps – if you could react quickly. Today, it can help you on the highway, on a sports field or to become a video game champion. In social settings, it can sometimes help you make a quick rejoinder to defuse a situation. But more often than not, it causes thoughtless pain. I cannot tell you how often I hear of someone who hurt another person because they did not follow the basic grade-school lesson of thinking before they speak.

Why are quick and negative reactions happening more? Perhaps because of the world’s technological leaps, we are reacting faster and faster.

Our world is losing its filters. As I was sitting at my desk trying to compose these thoughts, calls came in, my cell phone vibrated, people texted me and emails intruded – literally flashing on the bottom right-hand corner of my screen – tempting me to react immediately.

I work hard to bring back some of the process that should go into responding to a thoughtful communication. I will compose an email, sleep on it, edit it the next day and then send it. Of course, the quantity of the communication, email and otherwise, we all face often precludes that. All this makes for a reactive world.

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Today, is *Yom Hakippurim*, the day of *kapparah*, of atonement. A day when we can reject the temptation to react without thinking. It is the ultimate Shabbat. Not only do we remove distractions, as we do on every Shabbat – things like cell phones, emails, text messages, we even remove all food. This allows us to be fully present with ourselves and those around us in our *kehillah kedoshah*, our holy community and above all, with God. This is a time for reflection, not for quick reactions.

This is the meaning of one of the key words of this season: *Hineini*. *Hineini* means “Here I am” or “present.” But, *hineini* implies a relationship. If we just said in Hebrew, “*po*,” present, it means, we’re here, but when God calls Avraham and he replies *hineini*, it teaches us that Avraham is not simply answering that he is here, but that he understands that God needs him. Rashi explains that *Hineini* implies humility and readiness; it means that you are thinking about the one who is calling you.

Similarly, when we are faced with someone who calls out to us, our tradition asks us to respond *Hineini* – to truly listen to the other by understanding what we are feeling. That leads to real insights into how the other person feels – thinking about this before we respond is the key.

Now, this is not easy; in fact, it's a constant challenge. We feel many things and those with whom we come into contact are also feeling many things, but thankfully, our tradition has given us tools to help us from davening to meditation to reciting *brakhot* – blessings.

The siddur has a wonderful text to help us in this process:

“Elohai netzor l'shoni mei'ra - My God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies. Help me ignore those who would slander me. Let me be humble before all. Open my heart to Your Torah, that I may pursue Your mitzvot.”

Placed at the end of the *Amidah*, we find this personal prayer. While we can always compose our own prayer and words, the siddur provides us with this example written by Mar, the son of Ravina in the fifth century. While the Talmud records a number of the personal prayers including Mar's written in the singular, Mar's was chosen for the siddur by the Geonim, the rabbis and scholars of the Jewish people living in Babylonia in the eight through tenth centuries. These prayers were composed so the *Amidah* would not be a rote recitation, but its ideas and purpose would be clear and the values evident; it also reminds us to author own prayers – be they spontaneous or not. Whether one recites this text at the end of the *Amidah* or composes a personal prayer, Mar's prayer is a guide for how to react and how not to react to others.

The text is powerfully personal – *Elohai*, my God – guard my tongue from *ra* – evil and my tongue from *mirmah* – lies. But it's more than that; it's a reminder that I should watch how I speak, how I react, lest I cause harm or hurt another. It goes on: even to those who would slander or hurt me, I will try not to respond.

V'nafshi - And let my soul be like *afar* – dust before all. What does it mean to make one's soul dust? I think it means to be humble, to fill one's self with a deep sense of humility. Humility reminds us that we should think carefully about how we act and speak. Making our soul like dust reminds us of our place in the world.

Dust also reminds us of death, that we are mortal and make mistakes. Given that, how we speak verbally and non-verbally becomes a vital way for how we interact in the world.

The opening lines of this prayer can serve as a metaphoric warning sign to watch how we speak, how we act and how we react. It is what we should take from the *Amidah*, placed before us as a reminder.

Each situation we confront – a glass of orange juice spilling on the carpet or an argument at a meeting is really not about the content of the moment. While I am sure the

stain or the topic of the argument are important, they are not as important as the response. We can defuse a tense moment in our own homes, in our community or beyond, by choosing to react differently.

Given how full our lives are, I know how hard it is to be less reactive. Many of us, including me, when we come home after a busy day can feel overwhelmed. It is important to remind ourselves that we have the power to take a deep breath and recalculate.

In fact, our responses can turn things around. A friend shared with me the following vignette.

A rude and impatient driver on line at a Starbucks drive-thru in Florida was angrily honking and shouting at the driver ahead of him to move it along. When the man being honked at reached the order window, he told the barista that he was paying for the drink of the man behind him. The honker was so moved by the gesture, that he bought the drink of the person behind him. This chain of kindness continued ALL DAY LONG. When asked why he did it, the first gentleman explained, "It wasn't an idea to pay anything forward, nor was it even a random act of kindness, it was a change of consciousness (to) take this negative and change it into something positive."

That's it – so simple and so profound. Just change your approach slightly and instead of reacting negatively, react differently, react positively.

One of my teachers Rabbi Jonathan Slater shared with me a Hasidic teaching about this from the *Toldos Ya'akov Yosef*, the work of R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonoye in the eighteenth century. He was a descendant of Rabbi Yomtov Lipman Heller, author of *Tosfos Yomtov*, the famed commentary to the Mishnah and my ancestor; which would make this rabbi my cousin. He wrote the first *hasidic* book ever published in which we find this teaching:

"It appears to me from what I have received from my teachers and colleagues that this is how to behave with compassion toward all others. Even when you see something ugly or unbecoming in another person, you should turn your heart to thinking that the Holy One dwells there, too, since there is no place devoid of [the Holy One] (Him). It is therefore for your good that you have seen this, since you have some aspect of this same ugliness in you as well, and this will move your heart to *teshuvah*. . . . In these manners you will come to accept this situation as good, and ultimately that it truly is for your good... And, when it says, "I have placed God before me (*l'negdi*) always", it means that even when there is some sort of opposition (*negdiut*) that might cause me to desist from Torah or prayer, I can understand that this comes from Heaven for my good."

What a wondrous teaching and way to approach others in life. Use the things, the moments and even the people that may initially bother you, not to react, but to calmly and meditatively look inside and perfect ourselves.

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You know, my GPS is great. Its “recalculating” soothes me and reminds me to bring more “recalculating” into my life. While the GPS can help me on our Boston roads, it is not human.

As we turn now to our Mitzvah Pledge Card Appeal, we realize that our reactions and responses to each other are what is most vital.

May we all plot the right course to be sealed for a year of blessing - *gmar hatimah tovah*.