

Does Anybody Have a Map?

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon - MakomNY
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Many of you know that my son Sam and I have taken several long road trips over each of the past two summers. Sam liked being in the moment and just showing up, but I like to plan. Not over plan, but just map it out, literally. I know the GPS will get me where I need to go, but I like to look at a map, sprawled out on the table, and I figure out the basics of where we will go – what direction, what route, what highlights, and then the rest can fall in to place.

Whether or not you are literally a map person, I imagine there are many maps that guide our lives, from literal maps of buildings and places and neighborhoods to schedules of our days and weeks and years, guided by school bells and lunch hours and train schedules and calendars. Sometimes we may choose to stray from the map, or the schedule, or the plan, but that is typically a conscious decision.

These past 31 months, **31 months, 940 days!**, we have had no map, no schedule, no bells and no plans. One day the world seems to be functioning as it always has, more or less, and the next day, everything changed. Stay home. Mask. Wear gloves. Open your mail in the garage. Remember that? Plastic barriers. 6 feet. 3 feet. No more offices. No more classrooms. Virtual learning. Virtual work. Virtual services.

Pandemic. Health care workers. Vaccinations. Boosters. Variants. More variants. Hybrid. In-person. On-line. Zoom. First responders. Coronavirus. Vaccination cards. Proof of vaccination. Excelsior Pass. ZOOM! Google meets. Pfizer. Johnson and Johnson. Moderna. Cloth masks. Disposable masks. K-N95. K-N94. WOW! A vocabulary we never knew, and never wanted to know.

And on top of all things pandemic, which is plenty for any one lifetime, we are living in a time of complete uncertainty and challenge. January 6th. Our democracy as we knew and understood it, whether blue, red or purple. Anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, anti-Jewish, anti-me. Roe v. Wade, choice, freedoms. Scandals. Abuse. Mistrust. Hatred. Racism. Guns. QAnon. War. Ukraine. Iran. Russia. Immigration. January 6th.

And if the world issues and the pandemic weren't enough, so many of us have been living through nightmares. Terrible, painful loss. Crippling illness of loved ones, friends, community members and strangers. Divorce. Financial struggle. Injury. Pain no child should know. Pain no parent should know. Loss no family should experience. Struggle that is unbearable.

I don't know about you, but I am exhausted. And I'm frustrated. And I'm sad. And I even get angry, which is so not like me. And my patience is much less than it used to be.

I know – Rosh Hashanah is typically the uplifting words of our liturgy and the sharing of gifts and blessings from our world. And it will be.... But first, we must acknowledge our pain. Our challenge. Our anxiety. Our depression. Our hopelessness. Our despair.

I thought, 31 months later, the world would be better. WE would be better. But people are still getting sick, people are staying home, and the aftermath of a world-wide pandemic is nowhere near over. Not yet.

Many of you have heard me speak about the concept of flourishing, or thriving. The idea that we are not striving for success, or wealth, or perfection in life, but rather we are in pursuit of an authentic and real life that brings us true inner joy and happiness, while connecting with others in deep and meaningful ways. It's the perfect Rosh Hashanah message, and it is one I have shared many times.

But this year, I don't believe the goal is flourishing. At least not yet. NY Times author Adam Grant writes about a concept called existential languishing. He describes it as the middle child between flourishing and depression. It is the absence of well-being. In Jewish terms, it's not great nor horrible, it's just... 'eh'.

I know for many of us, and our loved ones, we have gone through periods of anxiety and depression. Mental health is more of a challenge than ever, and thankfully the awareness of mental health issues and the support for them has grown, even as the need has grown, though there is always more to do. But what is that feeling when you are not feeling elated or joyful, or maybe you are sometimes, but you are also sensing a dulling of delight, a dwindling of drive to do, to accomplish, to flourish, what is that feeling? THAT is the existential languishing, and it is everywhere right now. And we didn't expect it. And we didn't plan for it. And there is no map about how to navigate it.

You all know the quintessential story of Moses freeing the Israelite slaves from Egypt. When we retell the quick version, we hear: they were slaves, Moses freed them, and we sing a song of celebration. But what happens next? Yes, they wander for forty years before they find their way to the Promised Land. But the moment of elation – as they cross the Sea, fleeing from Pharaoh and the taskmasters, that moment passes, and we then discover that they are sad, and frustrated, and challenged. Maybe they too were feeling that absence of well-being in the moments of unknowing and insecurity. They had a map of how to get from Egypt to Israel, but remember – they didn't take the straight path – they went around. They wandered, unknowing, aimless, finding their way.

It seems we are in the desert again. We too are wandering. We are finding our way. How did the Israelites find their way? They had Moses, yes, a leader who came into maturity over the years. But they also had God. As our liturgy says from the Book of Exodus, in the part of the Torah just after Moses shatters the tablets and is truly struggling with people, life and the world, it is there that we find the words:

הֲתֵנָּה | הֲתֵנָּה אֶל רַחֲמֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲרָךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסְדִּים וְאַמֶּת

A God who was, who IS compassionate and gracious, abounding in kindness and faithfulness. And when we are having trouble finding God, seeing God, feeling God, then we Jews turn to action to help lead us to a path of holiness and connectedness.

I know I am late to the game, but our daughter Sophie and I had the chance to see Dear Evan Hansen just before it closed. For those who are unfamiliar, this incredible Broadway show is about a high school student, Evan Hansen, who has felt invisible his whole life. However, when a tragic event shocks the community and puts him in the center of some controversy, Evan is given the opportunity of a lifetime, the chance to become someone else.

So many of the lyrics and messages resonated with me while watching this incredibly emotional and powerful story unfold. One of the songs is entitled Anybody Have a Map?, and it's the perfect message for today. It says:

“Does anybody have a map?
Anybody maybe happen to know how to do this
I don't know if you can tell, but this is me just pretending to know...

So where's the map?

Is there a class that I can take to learn your language?
'Cause I am trying to get with it
Somebody come to the rescue before I'm too far gone.”

It seems for many of us that we have lost our map to the journey of life, and it needs to be found. Like Evan, perhaps we have been feeling invisible, or frustrated, like we wish we could just be in someone else's shoes. Or.. for some of us, we have experienced incredible joys and celebrations of recent, new life, new relationships, new community, new focus, but we realize that our joy may be lessened, or dampened, because of the world around us, so what do we do? Where is our map?

It seems to me that Rosh Hashanah is a chance to find our map, to reconnect with the self we were meant to be. Today, as we celebrate life, and acknowledge our truths, let us realize that we each have a sacred toolbox that holds the tools necessary to forge ahead, to create our map, if only we use the gifts that were given to us since the day we were born – a vessel of possibility.

I hope the following sacred acts will support us as we navigate the day-to-day. This is not a prescription, where you can go and fill it, and feel better tomorrow (though I'm not sure how often that happens anymore), but rather this is a menu of opportunity, to help us eventually return to a place of flourishing and thriving, but for now, it's just the first step... living comfortably.

The first tool is **HONESTY**, and it is perhaps the hardest one. I'm not talking about telling the truth versus lying kind of honesty – the black and white kind – like – did you eat the candy bar? Or who left the car on empty? I'm talking about finding a way for us to be honest with ourselves and others about how we are really doing, how we are feeling, all while acknowledging that there are those of us who choose to be more private, and those of us who wear everything on our sleeves, and finding some kind of a healthy balance.

Social media makes honesty very hard. What we put out on Facebook is, what I now call, the Facebook story, but it is not necessarily the reality, nor the truth. And that is ok, as long as we realize it. I have actually now started to say to people something like – it looks like your child is doing well according to your Facebook story, but just checking in to see how they are really doing. One of you actually commented recently to me that 'this was the Facebook post, but you should have seen what happened just after that picture.'

Many of you saw the posts this summer from that trip I mentioned earlier when Sam and I drove throughout the Southeast states. What you didn't see in my Facebook posts is that I experienced perhaps the scariest 30 minutes of my life. Don't worry – Sam is fine, but for a bit, he wasn't. We were driving from Baton Rouge, Louisiana to New Orleans. We were five minutes from our hotel when I felt his head on my shoulder. I thought he was just snuggling, because he is that kind of kid, but when I looked over, I immediately saw that he was having a seizure. He was completely non-responsive. Not something I had ever experienced.

I rolled down my window, screaming, honked my horn, got across four lanes of bumper-to-bumper highway traffic, and pulled his body out of the car. It felt like forever before the ambulance came and took him to Tulane Medical Center. He only woke up sometime in the ambulance, a good 20 minutes after the whole episode began.

Luckily, David had flown down to spend the middle part of our road trip with us, so together we navigated Sam's post seizure mending, and after a few days, we got back on the road. And that is the short version of the story, but it was the scariest time of my life. Not knowing, being in a strange place, truly experiencing trauma.

I tell you this story not to scare you nor to cause you to feel badly for us – Sam is fine, no driving for at least 6 months, but he is fine, and I'm better. But I tell you this story to say.. I really struggled with how to share this story- do I post about it? Do I just keep it for close family and friends? I chose not to share this story on Facebook, and so our pictures continued, not to mislead, but because I don't use Facebook in that way.

But when I came back, and people said – it looks like you had a great trip – my response became.. yes, and. One of you even said to me – I knew not to trust the Facebook story. So here's the thing. Facebook, or any social media, is not necessarily the place to share all the challenges. Or maybe it is. But perhaps more importantly, we have to be honest to how WE are doing, how we are FEELING.

Now that I have a college freshman, I have learned that the question – how is Sam doing? is a common one. And I so appreciate the inquiry. And if I'm passing you in the aisle at the grocery store, I might just say 'fine', but if we have a few minutes more, I might say – it's great, and it's hard, but he seems to be managing. And then we can really share, honestly.

How often do we get asked how are you, and we immediately respond with 'fine', without even registering the question that was just asked. And how often do we ask the question, and aren't really looking for the truth, for we don't really have the time to hear 'the whole story'.

I'm not saying we should divulge our innermost secrets at the kiddush following this service. But when asked, it is ok to say great if that is really how you are feeling, but it is also ok, even encouraged to say: this has been a tough year, how about you?

For Judaism, truth, *emet*, is more than just a virtue. It is one of the three fundamental principles, along with justice and peace, upon which the world stands. And as rare as the trait of honesty is, the trait of integrity — the ability not only to say what you mean, but to mean what you say — is even more difficult to find. However, while we are trying to rebuild our world and ourselves, being honest might actually allow us to do the work in a more real way.

The second tool each of has is the ability to find **JOY** in our lives. Yes, I think we are good at capturing the great joyous occasions like weddings and births and B'nai Mitzvah celebrations. Maybe we are even good at capturing the middle tier events, like graduations and birthdays, anniversaries and vacations. But are we able to find moments of joy in the small, seemingly insignificant events that happen moment-by-moment, day-by-day.

- Do the teachers among us stop to feel the joy when we watch a student have an aha moment, after struggling for so long?
- Do the parents among us stop to feel the joy when our child has a little moment of success, not winning the game, just catching the ball, maybe for the first time all season?
- Do the activists among us stop to feel the joy when they ignite in a young person the desire to do something small to make the world better?

Believe it or not, joy is a mitzvah, something we are obligated to partake in. Even when we are in mourning, we pause from our intense mourning for Shabbat, and we actually end our week of mourning if there is a holiday on which we celebrate joy, like Rosh Hashanah. You know that we Jews are known for our good food – a meal with every event – a kiddush, an oneg, a bagel or a whole brisket. These customs around food are connected to our obligation to find joy and celebrate the good in life.

This is a year where we must seek out the joy, perhaps more than ever. We must find ways to name, and capture the small, in-between moments. We cannot wait for the big events to happen, because if the past 31 months has taught us anything, and I believe it has taught us a tremendous amount, we have learned that the big events might not happen, AND there are still joyous moments to be celebrated.

The third tool each of us has is the ability to feel **GRATITUDE** in our lives. Let me return to my road trip with Sam. Even after the scariest moments of my life, I realized quickly that I had incredible gratitude. I was grateful that we were five minutes from a major medical center. I was grateful that David happened to land a few hours prior to the event. I was grateful that Sam wasn't driving at that moment. I was grateful he was sitting next to me and not chilling in the back seat with his air pods on.

And I was incredibly grateful to the ever-so-kind man named Lonny, who pulled over immediately, called 911, kept his finger on Sam's pulse to make sure he was breathing, and called us multiple times afterward to check on Sam's progress. And the other two women who pulled over, one with a young son, who kept saying Sam's name, telling him he was going to be ok, which actually kept me focused on the task at hand.

This past week, Makom friends said goodbye to a father and grandfather, just one month before a Bat Mitzvah, that meant so much to this grandpa. It isn't fair, it isn't right, the timing is awful, and when we talked about how to find the joy heading into Rosh Hashanah, we realized quickly that the joy is in the incredible relationship this man had with his children and grandchildren, something that can never be taken away, a real blessing, something truly worthy of thanksgiving.

In our most challenging of times, times like these, gratitude, paired with joy and honesty, might just be the tools we need to turn this ship and start setting out to a healthier, more positive path. Ultimately, these tools will help us to choose life, which is, of course, the greatest lesson of these High Holy Days.

So choose life, living, and being, through a real commitment to honesty, an ongoing acknowledgement of gratitude and deep search for and appreciation of joy, and then we, each of us, will be able to change this crazy world, by changing a little bit of me.

May it happen soon! May it be so!