Kol Nidre– 5787 – Stay at the Table -Rabbi Andrea Merow

There is something religiously compelling about a GPS device.
You miss the turn. And the GPS does not yell at you.
It does not say, "Seriously? I told you 450 feet ago to turn"
It does not say, "You always do this." It simply says: "Recalculating." There is another way from here. You may wait a few moments. The GPS tracks the traffic and then gives you options, turns in the road that you might not expect. And you are asked if you want to choose this new path. This is a great way to describe teshuvah.

Living a life of Teshuvah is about always being willing to "recalculate". During these Ten Days of Repentance, and especially on Yom Kippur, we are asked to do teshuvah. The only problem is that I am not certain we always agree on what teshuvah means. Some translate it as repentance. Or returning. Or turning. These translations make teshuvah sound as though it has a clear beginning and end. We sometimes ask, "Did that person do teshuvah?" as though teshuvah were a single act that could be completed at one discrete moment: They did something wrong. They admitted it. They apologized. They made amends. Finished.

But real teshuvah takes practice, persistence, and time. We like to imagine change as a single dramatic moment: a person is struck by lightning, has a great revelation, and suddenly becomes someone new. Occasionally that happens. My dad smoked when he was young; I knew him only as an anti-smoking crusader. When I was a teen, I tried to persuade my mom to quit. I asked Dad what had made him stop. He said that early in medical school, he saw and held a lung that had been decimated by smoking. And that was it. He stopped cold turkey.

That kind of transformation is rare. More often, change looks like this: We try. We fail. We try again. We fail differently. We make a small correction. IF we remain committed to the work, slowly, and with practice— we may subtly become different.

Psychologists James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente studied this exact pattern — how people actually change, starting, tellingly, with how smokers quit. They found change rarely happens in one clean leap. It cycles: we try, we relapse, we try again, each pass bringing us a little closer, until the change finally holds. Relapse, they found, isn't the opposite of change. It's part of it.
(www.simplypsychology.org/transtheoretical-model.html)

Which is why I believe one of the goals of Yom Kippur is to help us become ba'alei teshuvah. Masters of living a life of teshuva, not a day, or ten days even. I don't mean ba'al teshuvah defined as one who becomes religiously observant. The phrase, to be a ba'al or ba'alat teshuvah, can mean something different and much larger. Judaism asks us to be a master at the art of turning or returning. Not of having returned, but of continual return, continual turning. Of someone who makes the practice of "recalculating" through introspection part of our everyday experience.

We often say that we want to live by Jewish values. One of our deepest values is the daily practice of looking honestly at ourselves and returning to right living. To live a life of teshuvah is to recognize that next week, next year, we do not have to be exactly who we are today.

In the parking lot after Yom Kippur shofar blowing, on the way to my bagel, someone often asks me: Why, immediately after Yom Kippur ends, do we need to recite a weekday Amidah where we ask God for forgiveness? The person looks at me incredulously: "What could I possibly have done in the last two minutes since Yom Kippur ended that requires forgiveness?"

I think this is a beautiful religious question:

The answer is that Teshuvah does not end on Yom Kippur. We are meant to "recalculate," make course corrections, and be masters of returning—every day, even several times a day. We are meant to live an examined life. Judaism has built a daily practice of that self-examination into the rhythm of our lives: tefillah. One casualty of contemporary Jewish life may be that, as some have moved away from daily prayer, we have lost one of Judaism's great daily opportunities to practice teshuvah.

Maybe part of the problem is the word "prayer." It comes from Latin and French words meaning to ask or plead, so prayer can sound primarily like asking God for something. But the Hebrew word tefillah points us in another direction. It is connected to discernment and judgment. Our tradition understands the word l'hitpalel—to pray—as introspection.
Tefillah is not only asking God to change something for us. It is creating sacred time where we can look inward and make a course correction for ourselves.

When we approach Jewish prayer each day as sacred introspection, we find that we are asked daily to search our hearts, notice where we've missed the mark, and return. Not only on Yom Kippur. Every day. Yom Kippur is simply our full day of intensive practice. We say the confessions again and again. We tap our hearts, naming where we've missed the mark. We look inward and ask: Is this still the path I want to be on?

That is the kind of ba'al or ba'alat teshuvah we can aspire to — not someone who has completed the journey, but someone who keeps returning. Not only on Yom Kippur. Every day of our lives.
We repeat the gesture; we tap our hearts so many times today because we NEED it to become part of us. So that tomorrow morning, the morning after, and some ordinary Tuesday six months from now, we might pause, tap our hearts, and ask: Where did I miss the mark yesterday? What do I need to repair today? God, help me. How do I return? That daily return is what tefillah asks of us, one ordinary day at a time. Today we practice.

My brilliant teacher at Hartman, Tal Becker, taught that the Torah itself holds extraordinary examples of this kind of teshuva — in a single person, across decades, even as the through-line of an entire book. Near the beginning of the book of Genesis, Cain and Abel each bring an offering to God. God accepts Abel's offering but does not accept Cain's. Cain is consumed by jealousy and anger.
God warns Cain not to let his anger get the best of him. God tells Cain: You have a choice. You have agency. Your anger is real, but it does not have to control you. You can choose what you do next. And then, Cain goes out and kills his brother. God then asks him, "Where is your brother Abel?" And Cain answers with the most profound question in Torah, or anywhere: **"Am I my brother's keeper?"**
That question hangs over the entire Book of Genesis. Am I responsible only for myself? Am I responsible for my family, my community, God's other children?

Generations later, Judah finally answers this question.

We meet Judah as an adult, and he does NOT his brother's keeper.
In fact, quite the opposite. Judah and his brothers plot to kill their brother Joseph, because their dad favored him. Brother Reuben then proposes to throw Joseph into a pit instead, secretly intending to rescue him. But then Judah proposes another plan: "What profit is there if we kill our brother? Come, let us sell him." Judah helps save Joseph's life—but He sells his own brother into slavery. I guess you could say that is a step up from what Cain did to his brother. He is not his brother's keeper

He watches as Joseph is taken away. And returns home and lets their father Jacob believe that his son Joseph is dead. This is not the moral high ground. This is Judah at the beginning of his journey. Years later, Judah finds himself at a similar moral crossroads. Maimonides teaches that this is the truest test of teshuvah, not only remorse or apology —but standing in that same situation again, with the same temptation, the same opportunity to fail, and choosing differently.

Joseph—whom the brothers do not recognize—is now the second most powerful person in Egypt. When a "stolen" silver cup is discovered in Benjamin's bag, Joseph declares that Benjamin must remain behind as his servant. The other brothers may return home.
Judah has been here before.
Once again, a brother is about to be taken away from his father.
Once again, Judah has the opportunity to leave that brother behind and return home without him.
But this time, Judah chooses differently. He steps forward. He tells Joseph what the loss of Benjamin would do to his father. And then Judah says, in effect: Take me instead. Let Benjamin go home, and I will remain here as your servant. The man who once said, "Let us sell our brother," now says, "I will give up my own freedom for my brother." And here, near the end of Genesis, Judah answers the question Cain asked at the beginning: Am I my brother's keeper? Judah finally says, Yes. I am my brother's keeper.

This answer reveals just how much Judah has changed. His teshuvah unfolds across years. It begins with moral failure. It moves through other stories of painful recognition that he has been wrong. And finally, when life brings him back to the same moral crossroads, he chooses differently. The turning happened over a lifetime, and over the entire book of Genesis. Judah can say: Yes, I am responsible for what my actions do to others, to my brothers and my father. Yes, I have done wrong in my life. And yes, I can still choose differently now. That is teshuvah.

That capacity — to recalculate, to fail and become better — is such a core Jewish value that we even carry Judah's name. We are called Jews, Judaism. Judah-ism. Living Jewish values means being able to say to another, and to ourselves: I was wrong. It means we, descendants of Judah, strive to be masters of teshuva — people who live an examined life. That is what it means to be part of Judah-ism — not perfection, but moral growth.

Rabbeinu Yonah, an important 13th century Spanish rabbi, wrote in his Book Gates of Teshuvah, וְיַחְפֹּשׂ דְּרָכָיו וּמַעֲלָלָיו בְּכָל יוֹם A person should examine their ways and their deeds every day. Every day. Not only during the month of Elul. Not only during the Ten Days of Repentance. Not only during these twenty-five hours of Yom Kippur. Every day. Teshuva is a process. We notice. We take responsibility. We

are mindful of our emotions and of our actions. We repair what we can. We try and fail to be better, and we try again. And when we encounter the same moral crossroads again, we try to choose differently.

Psychologist Carol Dweck calls this a growth mindset — it is the belief that who we are is not fixed, that we are always capable of becoming someone slightly better than we were yesterday. Teshuvah asks the same of us, every day. (ctl.stanford.edu/students/growth-mindset)
Yom Kippur is not the day on which all of that work is completed. Yom Kippur is a day when we double down on introspection and figure out what we need to work on in our lives and in our character. Tonight and tomorrow, choose what you will begin to work on in yourself. Not all of it, one or two items.

We will miss turns this year. We will say things we regret. We will fall back into habits we thought we had left behind. We will sometimes fail to be our brother's keeper. And when we do, may we hear the sacred voice within us say: Recalculating. And know that there is another path from here.
May we have the courage to find it.
May we have the humility to turn to it.
May we become masters of the sacred, lifelong practice of living an introspective life, one where teshuvah is part of our everyday being, our everyday life. May we learn to recalculate and to be masters at doing teshuva.