

How's My Driving? Finding Our Gratitude in the New Year
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“Count your blessings,” my mother used to say. “Count your blessings.” What’s noteworthy about this phrase is that my mother said it in English, whereas most of her choice phrases were said in Yiddish. My brother and I never quite knew exactly what she was saying in Yiddish – only that it often wasn’t positive, and that it was meant as a somewhat private communication with my father, who seemed to understand, but didn’t respond. There was, “*Gibaa kuk wus a tzitzun ba mear*”.....Take a look at what’s happening around here. And on a not so good day we might hear, “*Chaluchma chaloachesen chapfsen findeah*” which we think meant, “I’m getting a little nauseous from all this.” On the positive side, there was “*shein b’d velt*,” beautiful as the world, which my brother and I sometimes heard said about us, but that phrase was mostly reserved for her grandchildren. But, “Count your blessings.” was said for everyone to hear. We weren’t just to get a sense of it, from hearing it in another language. “Count your blessings,” was meant for all of us to hear, fully. That’s why she said in English.

So over the years I would sometimes think about my mother’s words, “Count your blessings.” One time I was **not** particularly thinking of those words, was on Highway 70 from Indianapolis to St. Louis. You may know this stretch of interstate highway. It’s fairly flat, there’s usually at least one lane partially closed for highway improvement, and there are always lots and lots of trucks. We had just picked up our daughter, Eliana, from a month at summer camp. It was her fourth summer at GUCI. You might think GUCI is the camp for making designer clothes and handbags. But it stands for Goldman Union Camp institute – The Reform Jewish camp in our region, and get this – it’s in ZIONsville, Indiana. I was excited to see Eliana who just turned 15, and to meet her counselors and friends, but my excitement soon turned to shpilkis, a kind of Eastern European anxiety. “Let’s go already,” I was saying to myself, and eventually voiced this to both Debbie and Eliana. We had gotten up at 5 am and already had driven 4 hours to get to camp and, we had 4 more hours of that infamous highway yet to go.

We left after many hugs and goodbyes. Eliana, filled with friendship and blessings from camp, and being totally sleep deprived, dozed off as soon as we got on the highway. How to pass the time. What do we do for the next 3 hrs and 47 minutes?

Many in this situation would play 20 questions, or some other guessing game that’s good for long car rides. **Not us.** With all the intensive studying I’ve done over the past 4 years to be ordained as a rabbinic pastor, and given that my wife, Debbie is nearing the end of her program to become a Jewish spiritual director, **we** no longer play 20 questions. **We** read to each other.... Jewish stuff. It’s actually a very lovely practice. “What do you want to read, Debbie asks me. What are my choices? “Maimonides on *Teshuvah*, an article by Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav or, Steinzlatz’s 13-petalled rose.” “No Sports Illustrated on the upcoming football season, I joked.” “Nope,” Debbie said,

“Thank God we left that at home.” “OK, how about Steinzaltz’s 13 petalled rose?” Debbie began reading, and we began discussing God’s call to Adam, “*Ayeka*,” where are you, and how to know what’s in the way of us hearing God’s voice and feeling God’s presence in our lives. It was a good and lively discussion. God is even on Highway 70 from Indianapolis to St. Louis.

And then, I saw it. The sign; the sign on the back of the truck, just in front of me. The sign read, “How’s my driving?” Call 1-800 and the number. I became very interested in this guy’s driving. I tried to multi task – to stay engaged with Debbie, Adin Steinzaltz and the 13-petalled rose, and pay attention to the trucker’s driving. After a few minutes, I couldn’t do both. “Wait a minute,” I said. “What’s wrong,” Debbie asked. “I’m paying attention to this guy’s driving.” You’re what? There’s a certain look you get from your spouse when you’ve been married a really long time and you something a little strange. “Debbie,” I said with some excitement, “Do you know that this driver is staying mostly in the right lane, is driving the speed limit and is using his turn signal when he changes lanes?” Then I pointed out the sign on the back of the truck along with the 800 number. “I’m going to call the number and tell them how his driving is.” “You’re going to call right now?” “Yeah, let’s call.” At this point, Debbie is amused and is starting to have some energy on the idea. Besides, we needed a break from Adin Steinsaltz and the 13-petalled rose. We called the number on the back of the truck. “I want to give you some feedback on one of your drivers,” I said to the person who answered. I told her all the things the driver did well. She thanked me for taking the time to call and mentioned that the drivers get points for good feedback and the points go toward bonuses for them. I asked what most of the calls are like. She said that most people who call are negative or critical. Not a surprise.

I turned to Debbie and told her that I had an idea for my Yom Kippur sermon. First I thought I would talk about the sign, “How’s my driving?” Because at this time of the year, How’s my driving is actually an important question – not my literal driving, my emotional and spiritual driving. Asking others about our own emotional or spiritual driving and then being willing to do *teshuvah*, to make some changes in our driving is key for us as Jews. Did I make the ride this past year safe enough for you? Did I involve you enough when I wanted to change direction? Did I go too fast for you, at times? Did I hurt you or frighten you in any of my driving this past year? What if we went to the people we loved and asked these kinds of questions... and then left an 800 number for them to respond?

There’s a difference between asking someone, “how’s my driving” and someone telling you how your driving is **without** being asked. So then I thought I would talk about what happens when we get feedback from someone and we didn’t ask for it. It’s like being with a spiritual back seat driver. We didn’t give an 800 number but they called us anyway. This too can be part of the spiritual work that we do at this time of the year.

While such work is important, today, I want to focus on what the person said when I called to give my feedback about the driver. “Most of the people who call are negative or critical”, she said. I am saddened to hear it. And it may be that most of **us**

are also negative and critical - both in our literal phone calls and, more importantly, when we call out to each other. The thought of this also saddens me.

It seems like it's easy and familiar for us to be negative or critical. And the negativity or criticalness is everywhere we turn. In politics negative campaigning works. We hear from political consultants that it's more effective to say something negative about your opponent than to say something positive about yourself. In the news, negative sells. Turn on the evening news and you'll hear about war, murder, rape, abduction, corruption and abuse. When was the last time you heard, "Our top story tonight, 50, 000 people in St. Louis had a really good day today." We don't hear it. It doesn't sell. It's not compelling enough. It's not newsworthy. Maybe it's time for the positive to be a little more compelling and a little more newsworthy.

And even in our tradition, on this day of Yom Kippur we say, "*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha*, for the sin or wrongdoing or hurt we have done before You. We are to go to the people we've hurt, acknowledge what we did, make amends and vow not to do that hurtful behavior again. We're not here to acknowledge all that we did well this past year. The focus is on what we didn't do so well and what we can do better.

I wonder about the presence of the positive, especially in the ways we treat each other, because it seems as though the negative and critical are so pervasive. You know what it's like to be around a boss or supervisor who only focuses on the negative. Or the parent who mostly tells you what you **should do differently**. Or the spouse or friend who's quick to point out what your **not doing well enough**. We probably all have people like this in our lives. And then there is the negative voice inside our own heads that comments on all that we're doing wrong. We probably all have this voice, too.

In Leviticus 19:17 we read about *tochechah* – rebuking. "*Ho chei ach, tochi ach et ami techa*" it says in the text. "You shall certainly rebuke your fellow person." It's the commandment to reprimand. When you see your fellow person doing something wrong, bad, or harmful, it is actually your duty to reprimand him. There are some exceptions and the Talmud and later writings such as those found in the Mussar literature, give specifics about how to reprimand in a kind and caring way. None-the-less, Torah teaches us the importance of the reprimand. But what about the positive? The blessing? Where is the commandment to tell your fellow person what you like value or appreciate about them? Well, we also read in Leviticus, "*Ve ahaftah l're ah cha komocha*, you shall love your fellow person as yourself" (Lev 19:18). This message is central to us. What would the world look like if we all loved each other as we love ourselves? Still, the specifics of how to do this aren't so clear. So, how do we focus on the positive?

The year was 1977. I had been in private practice as a psychologist for only two years. I attended workshop in Los Angeles with a therapist/teacher whose work I greatly respected. The format included time to work as a client on your own material or work as therapist and get feedback on your work. I chose to work as a therapist. Someone from the group volunteered to be my client. Here was my chance to get feedback from a teacher whom I looked up to and whose approval I wanted. Needless to say I was

nervous working in front of him. And as you could imagine, it wasn't exactly my best work. In fact, it stunk. I knew it, the group knew it, and of course the teacher knew it. Then came the feedback. The group was polite and even told me some positive things. The teacher spoke and told me all that was **not good** about my work. I listened, doing my best to keep my disappointment inside. Then, I surprised myself with my relatively newfound assertiveness and said, "I'd like to know what you liked about my work." He paused and thought for a moment. "Ed, I didn't like anything about your work." It was a most difficult and painful psychotherapeutic *tochechah*. I learned something very important in that moment. I learned what **not** to say to someone. I also learned how important it is to include the positive. When I supervise a therapist, I ask them what **they** liked about their work. What did they feel they did **well**? I make sure I tell them what **I** think they did well. Then it's easier to say and to hear what they can do differently to stretch or to strengthen, or to improve their work. Nobody ever died hearing what they do well. And there's always something the person does well.

So how do we focus on the positive? The practice of gratitude. In Hebrew, there are a number of words for gratitude. *Ha a racha*, literally "appreciation"; *hodai yah*, which sounds like kumbayah, which means "thanks", and perhaps the most common, which is *hakarat tovah*. *Ha ka rat* from the verb *l'hakir* "to recognize" and *tovah*, "good" – recognizing the good. Gratitude is recognizing the good. Interestingly enough, although not from the same Hebrew root, the same three letters (*heh, kaf, resh*) in the word *hukar* which means to be recognized are the same three letters that form the word *hachor* which means either "to deal harshly" or "to estrange oneself."

The Hebrew hints at three possible ways to respond to the positive or the good: deal harshly with it, estrange yourself from it, or recognize it. We deal harshly with good when we say or we do anything negative or critical in response to someone else -- like the way my teacher responded to me. Another example of dealing harshly occurs when we give a **positive** and immediately follow it with a negative or criticism. "You did really well on your report card but what about that "C" in science? or "I appreciated the ride this morning, even though you were 15 minutes late picking me up." We all know this style because we all do it at times.

A second way to respond to the positive or to the good is to estrange oneself from it or remove oneself from it. We know this style, too. We estrange ourselves from the positive by not allowing ourselves to do acts of lovingkindness for others or to receive acts of lovingkindness from others. I'm sure we know of instances in which we just didn't take the time to do something caring for another and other times when we ourselves couldn't graciously accept when someone did something kind for us.

Then there's *hakarat tovah*, recognizing the good. How might we do this? Here are four ways, and, as it says in the portion, "*Ki karov eilecha, ha davar m'od*, this thing is very near to you. *B'ficha, uvil, vavcha*, it is in your mouth and it is in your heart, *la asot*, that you may do it. **We can say and do** these things to recognize the good. The first is to identify the blessings in your life, the people, experiences that you're grateful for. I invite you to write them down, all of them, from the mundane to the wondrous. Keep

your gratitude list by your bed and when you wake up in the morning you can remind yourself of all that you're grateful for. You'll be starting your day with gratitude, just as the rabbis suggested. The second is to make a "thank you" at least once a day. Thank a person for something they've done for you to make your day better, and thank God through prayer or meditation. The third is to do an act of lovingkindness for someone at least once a day, any act that truly comes from your heart. The fourth is to continue to do the first three. The reason we call this, "the practice of gratitude" is that it's ongoing and is developed over a period of time.

In this morning 's Torah portion which Joe Esstman chanted so beautifully, we read, "*Hachayim v'ha ma vet nata ti lifanecha*, life and death I place before you, *ha bracha v' hakkalah*, the blessing and the curse. The rabbis suggest it's not **either** the blessing **or** the curse. It's the blessing and the curse. We all get the blessings **and** the curses. So, "How do we count our blessings when we feel we've been cursed? When a loved one is very sick, when a family member or close friend dies, when there is the mass devastation of a Hurricane Katrina or the destruction and the loss of life In Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Darfur – in the moments when we experience any personal tragedy, gratitude and blessings just seem impossible. The text helps us when it says, "*u v'chartah b'chayyim*, you shall choose life...." Maybe choosing life means to be able to feel and acknowledge some of the blessings when it feels like we're in the midst of a curse. Gratitude won't eliminate our pain and suffering, but gratitude may temper or lessen some of our pain and suffering and help us to feel better. We can choose life by making room for some blessing, even when, and maybe, especially when we're in the midst of a curse.

It's now 3:10 pm on Sunday afternoon, the day after our Rosh Hashanah service. I'm already not planning to go to my basketball game, at 3:30 pm. The phone rings. I'm annoyed. The last thing I want to do is talk the phone. I'm almost finished with my sermon and I want to finish it. I answer the phone anyway. "Hi Ed, its Jeremy Siegel Moss (one of our son Nick's lifelong friends, and also a musician). I called to thank you for the music on Rosh Hashanah morning. I don't know how much you had to do with the choir but I really liked the music. I thought it made the service." I was so glad I answered the phone, and I told Jeremy how grateful I was for his call and his kind words. I also told him that I don't have anything to do with how beautiful the choir sounds, and I would pass his thanks and appreciation on to Alan Freed, Leslie Caplan, Charles Collins and the choir. So thank you Alan, Leslie, Charles, and the entire choir for your beautiful music on behalf of Jeremy Siegel Moss. And thank you, Jeremy, for teaching us about gratitude.

One final thought. This year I am honored to be teaching the 9th grade class in the CRC Teen program. In our last class, two weeks ago, we talked about forgiveness and gratitude. I have the class' permission to share with you some of the things they are grateful for as they look toward the New Year. "I'm grateful for my family. I'm grateful for my friends. I'm grateful for life itself. I'm grateful that I'm in good health. I'm grateful that I feel happy. I'm grateful that I'm getting a good education. I'm grateful that I'm not hungry. I'm grateful that I get to go to camp. I'm grateful that I'm raised Jewish.

I'm grateful that I have enough money to live in a nice, safe area. I'm grateful that I have parents that let me know they love me, support me and look out for what's best for me. I'm grateful that I have places that I know I belong." Amazing. Amazing how much gratitude these beautiful young people feel. I invited each of them to thank their parents, their families, their teachers, their friends, and God for all the gifts that they have. I invite each of you to do the same. And then, we'll not only have a year filled with blessings, but a year in which we truly acknowledge our blessings, count our blessings, and share our blessings with others. *Gemar chatimah tovah*. May we all be sealed for a good life in this New Year. Amen.