

"ON THE HIGHWAY OF LIFE"

The two key words of this day, words which in their opposition/and antagonism to each other summarize the moral story of man's life and his conscience-struggles, are het and teshuvah. Het is usually translated as "sin," and teshuvah as "repentance." The ascendancy of het, or teshuvah, the supremacy of one over the other, is what marks the moral tone, the religious level, and the ethical success of a man, a community, or a people.

It is interesting to note, therefore, that these two words also bear another relationship to each other. If we analyze the original meanings of the words etymologically, we discover that het originally meant "to miss the mark," or stray from the path," while teshuvah meant "return," or return on to the proper path. Sin means to take the wrong road, to be lost; repentance means to find your way back again.

And indeed, this matter of treating the great issues of life as one treats a voyage on a road, is not new to us. Ki yesharim darkei ha-Shem exclaims the Prophet. The ways of the Lord are straight. So that there are ways of G-d. We speak too, in our everyday language, about a "way of life." The specifically Jewish way of life is <sup>a</sup>Halakhah -- again a "way." Courtesy, politeness, sympathy are referred to in Hebrew as <sup>e</sup>darekh eretz, which literally means "the way of the world," for on such a way must a world progress. Our Torah has its ways, the ways of pleasantness. Derakheha darkhei no'am. Our Rabbis talk of darkei shalom, the ways of Peace, on which we must strive to travel, and of darkei ha-emori, the ways of the Amorites, the ways of wickedness and evil and corruption onto which we sometimes <sup>stumble</sup>~~wander~~. And in a short while the Cantor will chant the Hineni he'ani mi-maas, the meditation before Musaf, and will plead, ve'heyeh-na matzliah ~~matzliah~~ darki; O G-d, prosper my way as I come to stand before Thee to supplicate for my people. For prayer, too, is a "way."

Most interesting is a point made by an eminent Semiticist of Yeshiva University. The Hebrew word-root L-M-D, from which we derive the words li'lmod u-le'lamed "to learn" and "to teach," originally comes from the noun malmad ha-bakar, the harness of the cattle. Why? Because this harness kept the animal face forward and gave him direction, keeping him on the right path. All teaching, therefore, is a matter of giving direction, of keeping a man on the right path, on the straight way of G-d, on the pleasant and peaceful ways of Torah, on the righteous ways of our Sages. Het causes man to lose his way. Teshuvah helps him re-discover it.

On this Rosh Hashanah, which is the first of the aseret yemei teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance, it is appropriate for us to discuss the causes for a man's losing his way, and the manner of rediscovering it. Permit me to present and analyze three such causes, three rules for accident prevention on the Highways of Life. And if I describe them in terms of the simple, homey, down-to-earth metaphor of the driver of an automobile, it is because even in this complex and complicated world the truly great issues are ultimately simple, direct, and immediate.

First, a safe-journey on the Highway of Life requires, above all, a clean windshield: an unobstructed vision of where we are going. We must know our goals, and plainly keep them in view. So many of us unfortunately, have an automatic, blurred life, a hit-or-miss existence. We get behind the wheel, and steer aimlessly, not seeing where we are going, not knowing where we are straying. Why do we work and sweat and perspire? Why do we seek security and status and profit? Why do we eat and try to stay healthy? Are we driving or are we being driven? Do we know what we want? Can we see, through our windshields, the desired goals of our lives? Without a clean windshield, without such goals in sight, a man commits het and loses his way. Teshuvah means cleaning your windshield: knowing what you are striving for.

Indeed, Rosh Hashanah gives us a clue to the setting of goals, to clearing our windshields. The first section of the Musaf prayer is called Malkhiot, for it

speaks of G-d's reign over all creation. According to the medieval philosopher R. Joseph Albo, Malkhiot is essentially the affirmation of the existence of G-d and the consequences of that faith. When a man believes in G-d, he knows that life is worth living, that he was placed in the world for a reason, that he has well defined goals of decency, of honor, of integrity. If a man accepts malkhiot, then the Torah is his map and the mitzvot are his landmarks. The windshields of his mind are clear, and he sees where he is going. Otherwise, without faith in G-d, the King of the Universe, man is blinded by doubt and enshrouded by the fog of perplexity, not knowing whether or not it is worth continuing the struggle of life, dubious as to where he is, undecided as to where he is going, and unconvinced that it is worth going any place at all on the Highway of Life. The Malkhiot -- the belief in the Creator, in Melekh ha-Olam -- gives man an unobstructed view of his destiny.

The second requirement for safely traversing the Highway of Life is -- a rear-view mirror. This is required by law and approved by common sense. If a person is to make any head-way in life, he must have a rear-view mirror, a constant reminder of his past, a clear definition of his origins. Unless you can keep the past in view, you never know when something out of that past will catch up with you unexpectedly and impede your progress.

Human beings naturally long to know their origins, their roots. It is an instinct that is universal in scope. Those who are acquainted with world literature will recognize it in the "Ulysses" theme. In order to know where we are going, we have got to know where we are coming from. And, therefore, especially as Jews, we must always keep in our mind's eye the rich tradition of our people, our magnificent though tear-stained history, the sacrifices of our forebears, the sacred teachings of our ancestors. We have got to be conscious of our origins. A man who knows the greatness of his past will not shrink because of the pettiness of the present. A true prince, though in exile, still holds his head high for he remembers his origins. With the edifying awareness of the past, we shall be able successfully to negotiate all the dangerous curves

of the present and future.

When most of our people came to these shores, there occurred the split between the generations. The second generation tried desperately to forget our whole tradition, which they associated with the immigrant status of their parents. It was part of the painful process of acculturation. But now the third generation wants to remember -- it must remember! -- what the second so wanted to forget. Too many of the past generation strayed from the path and were lost to us because, when they set out on their voyage of life, they blocked their rear-view mirrors. They committed the bet of forgetting.

The second great theme of Rosh Hashanah, Zikhronot, "Rememberances," bids us to remember our past. For even as we ask G-d to remember so must we, in imitation of Him, remember/---from the very beginning through the Akedah of Isaac by Abraham; from the prophecy of Moses through the wisdom of the Sages of the Talmud, from the piety of Medieval Jewry to the sweetness and holiness and martyrdom of European Jewry in our own day. Zikhronot bids us adjust our rear-view mirrors and keep our past in mind as we make our way into the future.

How do you remind yourself? By observing Shabbat and Yom Tov and their rich historical traditions. By cherishing every noble Jewish custom. By laying the Tallit and Tefillin which are symbols and reminders of the past. And above all -- by studying Torah, whether by attending a class or listening to a lecture or studying the Sidra or reading a book.

In the great song of Moses, at the end of his life, we read Zekhor yemot olam, binu shenot dor va-dor, "Remember the days of old, and consider the years of many generations." The first part of the verse, our Sages say, refers to ha-avot, the Patriarches, our ancestors. The second - elu yemot ha-mashiah, to the future days of Messiah. Happy driving on life's roads can be achieved only by remembering the avot, our ancestors and their tradition, and by keeping in clear view the aim of Messianic days.



The third important secret of good journeying on the right path, is to obey the speed limits. Some motorists, as we know from experience, are almost immune and oblivious to this regulation. Yet how many fatal accidents are caused by exceeding these limits!

How that one, sharp, compact command is important to us to-day: "S L O W!" Our lives are permeated with the rush and bustle of our surroundings. Speed is the great virtue of our civilization. We rush to work, rush to eat, rush to play, even rush to rest and rush to sleep. We have not time to think, to look, to meditate, to consider. The ulcer, even more than the Nuclear Bomb, will perhaps some day become known as the distinguishing mark of our fast culture. Our journey is all too speedy, and as a result we do not see what happens about us. We burn up our life's fuel at an early age, and we leave ourselves open to swerving and skidding from the right and true path.

Do you recall Joseph's admonition to his brothers shortly after their reunion, when he revealed his identity to them? Al tirgezu ba-derekh, he said to them *As he sent them* to fetch their father Jacob and bring him to Egypt. "Do not fall out by the way." Our Rabbis explained that verse to mean: Al tifse'u pesiah gassah -- do not take large steps. Take it easy, do not hurry, slow down. I know, said Joseph, the rush and speed and hurry of life. I control Egypt's finances and her treasures. People are in a hurry. From Canaan and Ur, from Moab and Africa, from the world over, all rush to Egypt and rush back. They rush to buy and rush back to eat. They rush to build and they rush to destroy. Now that you are coming from a peaceful, tranquil society to this maddening pace of modern Egypt, don't let the virus of speed infect you. Slow down, brothers. For our father Jacob knew how dangerous it is to speed, never to slow down, never to think things over. What was his greatest worry? When he sent Benjamin here with you? Ve'karahu ason ba-derekh, lest an accident happen

on the way. ¶ Certainly when men speed, when they exceed the limits G-d sets, when they never slow down to catch their breath, then accidents occur, then men lose their way. They skid and swerve and collide with each other in their unthinking rush. Al tirgezu ba-derekh. Slow down. ¶ This is the season of introspection, of taking a breather, and thinking out in calm deliberation the more serious matters of life. The greatest opportunity for such respite, for a "stop" sign which makes us come to a peaceful halt before resuming our voyage, is the Shabbat. What a magnificent institution G-d gave us! One day a week you cease from your toil and labor, from the tensions of work and travelling, and you spend a day in and with your family, ushered ~~it~~ in by the warmth of the Sabbath candles, the joy of Zemiret and Kiddush, all relaxed, and conscious of the fact that man is, after all, not a slave to the machine and time-clock. One day out of seven we stop, wait, and then after havdalah we may start again. I confess to you that I do not know how it is possible for anyone to go through a whole week without a Shabbat and survive. Perhaps such people do not really survive. Perhaps that neshamah, that soul, that core of peace and tranquility within us, dies a little bit each time we fail to observe the Lord's "STOP" sign and slow down for Shabbat Kodesh.

There are two other "SLOW" signs which I think are most important to observe on the Highway of Life. One is, "SLOW--CHILDREN AHEAD." How many of us slow down sufficiently to pay some attention to our children? How many will put the brakes on the rush of business life in order to have a heart-to-heart talk with a son or daughter, to teach him personally, or to take time out to arrange for a check on his complete education, his religious education included?

The second one is "SLOW-CONSTRUCTION AHEAD." Yes, we have got to slow down if there is to be construction ahead. On this day let us turn to the matter of building ourselves up: by reading and studying; by praying and living as a Jew should. Let us turn too, to the construction of decent family life, to consciously and deliberately building better relations between husband and wife, parent and children, brothers and sisters. SLOW DOWN; Al tifse'u pesiah gassah.

9 I feel that the third section of the Musaf, the one that speaks of Shofarot, is what calls man to a slow-down in the artificial busyness with which he disguises his inner emptiness and silences the shriek of the vacuum within. Like the speeder on the turnpike who is hypnotized by his speed, <sup>too</sup> we/are mesmerized by our rush through life. We too fail to observe all the beauty of the countryside and the faces of the passers-by in our mad dash. In this frenzied city-life, how many of us ever get to know--really well-- our relatives, our own children, our friends -- let alone our next-door neighbors? Our senses are dulled, our mind numbed into a stupor. And so the Shofar calls out, as Maimonides interpreted it, Uru yeshenim mi-shenatkhem, wake up, ye who slumber; do not fall asleep at the wheel in your speedy journey through life. Slow down and habitu el nafshotekhem, take the time to look into your own souls and bolster your dwindling, fatigued, and neglected spirit.

On this Rosh Hashanah, then, the Jewish Tradition offers us wise counsel, the cumulative wisdom of 3,500 years, in navigating on the Highways of Life. In acknowledging G-d in Malkhiot, we are reminded to fix our goals in unobstructed ~~w/ndow~~ vision, through clear windshields. By recalling Zikhronot, remembrances of our Jewish roots, we adjust our rear-view. And Shofarot bids us slow down, desist from speed for speed's sake, and attend to the things that really count.

As the Shofar sounds, may it be for us a wailing siren from heaven directing us aright on life's great highway. As it calls us to teshuvah, to return to the right way ~~we~~ (that of TORAH) and head in the right direction ~~we~~ (that of G-d), may we heed the call of the open road and go on to new horizons, new vistas, new achievements: to a year of accomplishment without accident, progress without injury, peace without collision; a year of safety, health, and blessing.

Amen