



Rosh Hashanah 2008

“THE GREAT JEWISH DAY OF PERSONAL GLOBAL POSITIONING” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

This past July I had the pleasure of a quick two-day trip to Halifax, Nova Scotia in order to officiate at a wedding. The couple had found me, as have others, on the Internet. They were looking for a secular humanistic approach to celebrate their wedding that was consistent with their outlook and principles and there was nobody on hand locally to fulfill that wish. As I told their guests, I usually don't go this far afield for a wedding, but it was an interesting opportunity and we hit it off when they came to New York several months earlier.

One of the groom's best friends served as a master of ceremonies at the dinner following the ceremony. He recounted that when he first met the bride he was convinced this was a terrific match. His hope for his friend was that he wouldn't mess it up.

At the start of the ceremony I shared with the guests a line the couple had shared with me. They told me that at first they hadn't realized they were dating. Another good friend had to point it out to them. Sometimes we're aware of the journey we're on, sometimes it seems to happen around us and we catch up a bit later and realize where we are.

The next day I flew back to New York – to the Newark airport – and had arranged for a car service to pick me up and take me home. To my dismay, I saw my car, with its ID number in the window, drive by on an inside loop at the airport apparently heading for the wrong terminal based on incorrect instructions from his dispatcher. I knew where I wanted to go, but my ride was heading elsewhere. Eventually we got it all straight and he circled around to get me.

Once I was in the car the driver loaded in my home address in his GPS system and laid back waiting for instructions where to turn next. There would be no getting lost now. The female voice on his machine, giving instructions like “Go straight 2 miles” or “turn right on I-95” was firm yet calm, and, a bit disconcerting, perhaps even a little sensual, a kind of friendly automotive dominatrix.

The most important thing was that it knew where we were heading and took care of getting us there. But sometimes the mapped out journey is not the best one to take. I'm sure you would agree with me that Mapquest isn't always wise about the trip it offers and there are often shortcuts to get where we're going. Or, perhaps a sidetrip we want to make which isn't on the map.

So at the end of the journey I told the driver to ignore the GPS's instructions and go a different route. The GPS kept insisting on turning left and I kept saying to go straight ahead. On each rejected piece of advice, the machine uttered, with what may have been a disdainful tone, “Recalibrating” “Recalibrating,” until finally, much to the relief, I assume, of the GPS system, we accepted its guidance a few blocks from my home and did what it told us.

Why am I sharing all this with you? Because today, Rosh Hashanah, is the great Jewish day of Personal Global Positioning. It is a day for us to figure out where we are, where we've come from, where we're heading and how we're going to get there. Except there is no machine or computer program or celestial satellite to rely upon. It is up to us to establish our own bearings, chart our own journey and recalibrate where we're heading.

In the Bible, in practically the opening scene, the main protagonists face off with each other. Adam and Eve have eaten of the forbidden fruit and the deity God is hot on their trail. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the man and the woman hid from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said, "Where are you?" And the man said, "I heard your sound in the garden and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

Now on the face of it, God's question is rather absurd. After all, the deity is supposed to be all-knowing, all-powerful. What point is there in asking, "Where are you?" Doesn't God already know? Or perhaps the deity wasn't so all-knowing after all.

The classic rabbinic answer is that of course God knew where Adam and Eve were hiding. The question wasn't intended for them to identify their global positioning coordinates but rather their spiritual whereabouts. Where were they emotionally, philosophically, morally? Where were they personally?

And that, of course, is the question for us at the High Holidays. What are we up to? How do we assess ourselves? How do we come out from hiding, not from some bothersome and inquiring deity, but from ourselves. How do we own up to our own behavior? And how do we set a path for future? For ourselves, for our family, for the betterment of our community.

Apparently in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as my cab driver there informed me, it's fairly common for the early morning to be fogged in. The view is restricted. But soon enough, as the day develops, the fog burns off and it becomes quite sunny. Then one can gaze far ahead and see a beautiful vista unfolding in front of you.

As we enter this new year, let us also gaze ahead with determination and conviction.

Let us follow a path of commitment and dedication.

And let us let us seek to find ourselves and our purpose with an ever clearer vision and understanding.

Shanah Tovah. Happy New Year.