

**Shabbat Shuva:
On Nuance
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I have recently become a dedicated Waze fan. Waze, like many GPS systems, tells you how to get from point A to point B in the fastest way possible. It determines the best possible route based on traffic patterns and construction. The truth is, the satellite system is quite a mystery to me, one I try not to question too much. Indeed, life would actually be much simpler if we were to treat Waze like God and follow the commands and demands of Waze blindly. If we believe in Waze, when we type in an address, Waze will just get us there. Sometimes, we think we know better and we can't help but question the wisdom of Waze, attempting to charter our own path. But 99% of the time, we are wrong and end up stuck in traffic, or on a road to nowhere. Every now and then, we have the *chutzpa* to assert our own will and rebel against Waze, when we really think we know better, and ignore the commands of "turn right here, or left there." With Waze, life would be simpler, because we would never have to think for ourselves, and we would always get to where we are trying to go, eventually.

But, life just isn't black and white. It isn't that simple. The Maharal of Prague, 16th century mystic and commentator, puts it succinctly: *Ain ha'olam pashut* – the world is not so simple. The world, is actually, quite nuanced. (Be'er haGolah).

Nuance— I believe, is often lacking in our communal discourse. In fact, there is no original Hebrew word for nuance. Perhaps, as a community, we don't "do nuance" so well. We thrive in absolutes. In clear dichotomies - yes or no; for or against; good people or bad people; faith in God or no faith in God.

Nuance is lost on those who think in absolutes. Absolutism is easy. We don't have to think, we don't have to consider or respect the thoughts, opinions, beliefs and interests of others – especially those who disagree with ours. Once we take an absolute stand on anything we refuse to listen, refuse to acknowledge other viewpoints. We convince ourselves that *we* are all that matters. And that is always dangerous. It is perhaps the greatest and most overriding challenge our society faces.

When there is no nuance in the world, Yishai Shlissel, an Orthodox Jew thinks it is in his right to stab six people at a gay rights parade in Jerusalem, killing 16 year old Shira Banki.

When there is no nuance, a gunman shoots and kills nine people praying in a church in South Carolina.

When there is no nuance in the world, there is more conflict between spouses, parents, friends and children.

When there is no nuance, we can't have a civil discussion about tough issues, because we think about matters in absolute terms. We can't actually discuss the Iran deal, because it elicits overwhelming emotions, feeling of resentment from people on both sides. All Israelis will die; or alternatively, Iran will never acquire nuclear weapons.

We can't talk about refugees—because all people seeking asylum will be too burdensome to the community- they will never be absorbed. Or alternatively, we have a moral obligation to help every individual who seek asylum from disease and war ridden countries in turmoil.

When there is no nuance, we can't talk about social issues, homosexuality, gender, climate change, because we see these issues in absolute terms— good and bad, moral and immoral, death and life.

Our challenge is to understand the world with a more nuanced lens. To live in the beit midrash of Beit Hillel, who studied the laws of Beit Shammai as well as their own before determining halakha. The Gemara in Eiruvin (13b) explains it is because of this humility that we rule according to Beit Hillel. This is another core principle of nuance-- seeing and believing in the goodness of humanity.

Which brings me back to Waze. The brilliance of Waze, is that it does not only rely on satellite technology to give direction. Unlike most GPS systems, Waze relies on the communal wisdom of fellow drivers to report accidents, traffic patterns, and alternative routes. When Waze was designed by an Israeli, Ehud Shabtai the explicit aim of the project was to create "a community of users." The more people who use Waze, the more precise your directions will be. Ultimately, relying on others, on our community, on people is what gives us direction.

It is precisely embracing nuance, listening and hearing and relying on others, that will ultimately save us.

It seems, in the Gemara in Yevamot (121a) that Rabbi Akiva did not have a GPS system when his boat capsized, almost drowning him. The Gemara relates that Rabban Gamliel, witnesses his friend struggling, but is too far away to do anything. He collapses with grief.

Suddenly, Rabbi Akiva appears out of nowhere, and sits down next to him, and starts to learn Torah—just picking up on their previous conversation, as if nothing had transpired. Rabban Gamliel asks Rabbi Akiva "how were you saved?"

He answers: A plank (*daf*) saved me. And I nodded my head at every wave that came my way. דף של ספינה נזדמן לי וכל גל וגל שבא עלי נענעתי לו ראשי.

A plank saved him. Perhaps a life boat drove by threw him a life vest. Or someone lowered a plank and pulled him in. Somehow, he was saved, and was able to handle whatever came his way.

Often, our world feels like an ocean. We feel overwhelmed, like we are drowning. Although there are times when we feel like we can dive, splash, and playfully swim around, we all have moments when our heads barely bob just above water level. In the ocean of pain, often, what saves us is a plank in the form of human compassion and kindness.

When a white supremacist walks into a church and kills African Americans learning the Bible in their church-- what was the response? To hear and listen to one another. Bayit members visited Rev Roger Hambrick and the members of the Green Pastures Baptist Church Choir, singing songs of tolerance and love. We were offering one another a plank, a bridge towards understanding.

And, when Shira Banki died marching in support of her gay friends in Jerusalem, the following tweet went out: "bad things happen to good people, and a very bad thing happened to our amazing girl." And then, with unbelievable strength, they offered a prayer for a better world. The tweet continued: "The family expresses hope for less hatred and more tolerance."

These stories highlight the goodness of humanity. Not a people who give into the darkness that exists, but a people who see the world through a prism of nuance.

Our central *tefilah* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is the ancient and beautiful liturgical poem. The *Unetaneh Tokef* seems, at first, to be a prayer of theological absolutes.

Who shall live and who shall die...Who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer. מִי יַחְיֶה וּמִי יָמוּת...מִי יִשְׁקֵט וּמִי יִטְרַף

I would like to suggest that this paragraph of the *Unetaneh Tokef* is like our old GPS systems. There is no space for nuance. There is only one way to go. There is only right or wrong.

But, the paragraphs before and even after, allow for a little more nuance, for the communal input of Waze, that allows for incremental growth based on our interactions with others. When we allow change-- through *teshuva*-- acknowledging what we did wrong and apologizing to others; and through *tefila*-- coming together to lift our voices in communal prayer, and through *tzedaka*-- truly helping those in need, we allow others to impact and improve our lives. It is the Waze GPS system that compels us to hear the shofar as an instrument of nuance:

The great shofar will be sounded, and a thin still voice will be heard. וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע. וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַּקָּה יִשְׁמַע.

The strong, confident, absolute sound of the *tekiya*, surrounds the more nuanced, broken notes of the *shevarim* and *truah*. These notes that are unsure, less confident, can makes space for doubt, and anger, and frustration. They give us room to question our faith, get angry at God, and understand that the world is not so simple. It is complex. And, so we must listen, closely for the thin, still voice. The voice of nuance, that perhaps can guide us, comfort us, allow us to live in a world of chaos, and tragedy and suffering.

When we can listen to what others say-- accept the input and directions that our spouses provide for us, we will often pick the better route. When we see our children's flaws and challenges as opportunities, the path will seem clearer. When we see our own challenges as more nuanced, rather than being so judgmental and self flagellating, we will have the strength and fortitude to keep driving, to keep going.

To have nuance allows us to embrace God's compassion and accept that there is suffering in the world. To have nuance allows us to have faith in humanity. When we can hear one another, we are much better able to support and hold each other. And together we can nod our head, and stand tall against every wave, every hardship, that comes our way.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.