

Shabbat 11 16 18 Sermon

I remember like it was yesterday. I was driving, cruising down Astoria Boulevard with my dad, my brother and I, my brother was in the front seat, I was in the back seat. Just get ready for this, OK? Just put your seatbelts on here. My dad liked sports cars. He was driving a little bit fast, but it was OK, nothing too bad. And at just the right moment, I think it was my brother who told my dad to look out the window at something. There was a man, I think, on a ladder doing some kind of surveying, or just, I don't know what he was doing, saying hello to people, I don't know. It was on Astoria Boulevard. And sure enough, that's all it took for my dad to look out the window for that brief moment. And actually, two things happened. My dad looked out the window and the bus that was supposed to be making a left wasn't in the left lane, it crossed over into the left lane. There was a lot of things that were happening. But very quickly, we were in the back of the bus. And I remember the first thought my brother and I both had, which was, no school today? It's a little bit intense, obviously, an accident, crash.

Something happens when we're on the road. Something happens when we move from home outside. There's a contingency, there's a conditionality, there's an opening, right? Scary a little bit. Don't think about it that much. All you have to do is go a little bit faster than walking, and you realize how precarious your life is. How close you are to things that you shouldn't be that close to. So some of you know already that the last couple of weeks, not everybody, but some of you, because we're all such a small little community here, as big as we are, small, intimate.

I got myself a little scooter that has a little motor. Sometimes I pass your block on Central Park West, Rabbi Joe, I wave to you for my little scooter. Gets me places quickly. And something happens when you're on that. I don't know. I've been in two accidents already. The first one, I decided that I was so carefree. Anybody ever had, you're so carefree, right? You're on a scooter, but your windows are down. You're like, you know, baby boomer. I'm not a boomer. But if you are a boomer, you got the radio blasting. You're back in high school or who knows. It's scary and it's also emboldening. It's like something happens, zipping by. But what's the rush? What's the rush? Because it's not just distractions, but the sense that I have to get somewhere. The sense that if I don't get there quickly enough, something will be off, something will be wrong.

And it's not even a joke to say that many of us here in this room can at least acknowledge, in your own privacy of your own home, that maybe you've rushed really, really fast to get to a yoga class or to shul tonight. Maybe you have rushed in a way that placed the very thing you were rushing towards above your own safety or the safety of others. Maybe. Maybe.

What is it that can help us slow down and pay attention? Why are we always under the influence? Tomorrow morning, Jacob, the perennial runner, the one born with a hand on a heel, as if to say, wait for me. Don't go yet, Esau, his older brother's leaving the womb. Wait for me. The one who's named for the heel. He's got the swift foot, but he isn't introduced to us that way. He's introduced to us in the book of Genesis as the one who isn't walking, the one who is sitting. Yoshev o'alim.

Jacob is not in a hurry, not at least until he has to leave the family system. And when he has to leave the family system, he has to go far away because his brother Esau is going to kill him. He's sent away by his mother. And the Torah tells us that when he's sent away by his mother, it says, vayeitzeh Yaakov mi'be'er sheva, vayeileh harana. And Jacob left be'er sheva and went towards haran, where his family was from. The Torah doesn't have to tell us that Jacob left.

Vayeitzeh. Vayeitzeh is a word meaning exodus, exodus. Vayeitzeh, the first exodus from a narrow place is Isaac leaving his family. Vayeitzeh. The word is so anomalous that the commentary say, why do we have to know that he left? Just tell us where he went to. Why do you have to tell us that he left? The rabbi say, because this kind of leaving was momentous. It was fortuitous. It was, there was something about the leaving that took great energy. He had to get out. He had to go. Vayeitzeh harana, he goes to haran. And we know here, many of us know the story. He leaves and no sooner has he left, but he gets to a place and he has to go to sleep because it gets dark quickly. And he has the vision of a ladder up and down with angels. And he realizes, wait a second. God was in this place. I didn't know. But the word haran is important.

And it gives us insight into why we're in a hurry. Vayeitzeh harana, say the rabbis in Midrash Rabbah, also in other places, the word haran, which is the name of a place, haran is a place. They say alludes to the word haronav, which means anger.

That Isaac left his dysfunctional family system and Vayeilech, the first time we see Jacob walking, he don't walk a lot, is he walks towards resentment. Jacob hits the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more. Hit the road, Jack. And I'm angry. He gets behind the wheel angry under the influence of rage. Jacob gets behind the scooter. He gets on the road. And he's full of it. He's broken off the shackles. He's terrified because he's out on the road, but he's got his rage. He's got his anger. He's got his resentment. He's got his mood. Jacob travels angrily. He's on automatic pilot.

And God says to him, stop. You are driving, walking, running under the influence of anger. You are driving, walking, running under the influence of fear. You are driving, walking, running, living under the influence of a faulty absolute. Something more important than the way that you walk, the way that you talk, the way that you show up. Jacob is on the way to anger. He's on the way to resentment. He's on the way. And God says, stop here and rest. And so he sits there and he stops and he becomes aware of God's presence. And in that moment, Jacob has a vision. And in the vision, Jacob knows that no matter how he goes, if he goes under the influence of God, of love, of trust, he will go safely.

Not everybody that left their homes today, not everybody that left the safety and security of the doors returns this evening. Not everybody in the world who is walking as a pedestrian or standing at a street corner or just right here on the edge of an island on Park Avenue. Not everyone.

In fact, the numbers are pretty staggering. I'm sure many of you don't know this because I certainly did not. But every year, 1.25 million people die on roadways due to reckless driving. 1.25 million humans around the globe. 3,400 people a day. 3,400 people a day.

And at least one New Yorker every day dies because of a reckless driver. Someone driven by distraction and in distraction. We can't even focus on me when there's a little girl here and I'm talking about driving with distraction. It's hard. It's hard not to pull up next to somebody who just cut you off. It's hard not to be radio or texting. It's hard. But this is a public health epidemic, everybody. On the par with gun control and opioid, this is a completely preventable malady.

It's choices that we make moment to moment when we decide how to drive and where we're going. Many of you might not know this, but tonight and tomorrow, the entire weekend, is World Day of Remembrance for Traffic Crash Victims, a day created in 2005 by the UN to mourn the horrible loss of life and suffering that is happening every day due to preventable traffic crashes. We don't call them crashes. We call them accidents. Well, they're not. Most of them. They're crashes. Each of these moments of distraction, autopilot living takes a toll on us spiritually. Each of these moments is a painful way of remembering that life and death is in our hands every day in this city and around the world.

Many of you might never have heard of Seth J. Kahn, who's 22 years old, on his way to work, November 4th, 2009, a year after my wedding. And as he walked across the street on 9th Avenue and 53rd Street in Manhattan, a reckless bus driver made a left turn and ran over him and killed him. 22 years old.

Many of you might not have walked by 97th Street, where I walk by every day and seen that that street has been renamed Ariel Marina Rousseau. On June 4th, 2013, five years ago, on a Tuesday morning, four-year-old Ariel Rousseau was walking across the street with her grandmother towards the Holy Name School on 97th and Amsterdam when she was hit by a reckless teen driver. We could go on and on.

And yet, I guarantee you tonight, as I'm crossing the street near my home, someone trying to make a right turn onto an avenue where there's a red light waiting for them will be annoyed at me because I'm walking too slowly. And maybe that might be one of you in the car. Maybe one of you will imagine that taking your kid and getting them to a soccer game or getting in a cab and telling them to hurry up and speed somewhere is as important as the lives of people who are all around us.

Maybe one of us might change tonight. 3,400 human lives a day. How many people here have a car? How many people here have ever said to a taxi driver, you're driving too quickly, I don't need to get there that fast? Great.

How many people here have ever been in a car with somebody driving in New York City in a way that you felt uncomfortable, you didn't say anything? So here's what you can do, everybody. Tonight, I'm sorry, tomorrow night after Shabbat, inviting you to go online to visionzerostreets.org, visionzerostreets.org, and sign a petition to make every street in New York City Vision Zero so that we are absolutely creating new streets in this city that watch out for pedestrians. That's one thing you could do.

The second thing you could do is when you go to your dinner tonight, talk to someone about a moment where you yourself forgot that life and death were in your hands as you drove. Be honest. And if it isn't something that's relevant to you, talk about how you rush towards something and forget something else.

Do you want to be a little bit less about cars? How rushing towards haran with anger can eat us up. And the last thing that I'll ask you to do tonight is make a pledge to change language around how we think about these reckless choices that we make and others make. They're not accidents, they're crashes.

To begin to change a problem, we have to begin to language it appropriately and accurately and diagnose it and then seed into the culture a different way. Jacob left home and he left home with resentment. He walked out of the house and he got into a car and God said, stop, don't drive under the influence of anger or anything else. Drive under the influence, walk under the influence, live under the influence of the presence of the absolute. The yoga class will wait. The soccer game will come again. Every moment precious.

Please rise.