

**“Divine Image On Board”:  
Rosh HaShannah 5763 (1st Day)  
September 7th, 2002**

**Drash Given by Jennifer Clayman  
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles**

My knuckles are turning white. My heart is pounding. I can feel my pulse racing. My jaw is clenched, my head hurts. I want to scream. Frustration, anger, fear, all fill my mind. I am on my guard.

I am driving in Los Angeles.

Pick a freeway, any freeway. People are weaving, yelling, honking. Speeding, tailgating, talking on cell phones, failing to signal.

Who are these people? I say to myself (feeling morally superior). Who do they think they are?

I grow angrier and angrier. My frustration builds. I grip the wheel, harder. My foot on the gas gets heavier. And suddenly, I am speeding, honking, yelling, weaving. And feeling like I have every right to do so. After all, “they” did it first...

And then I catch myself. And I think, What is going on? I’m not a mean, vindictive person. So why am I driving like one? What is happening to me? Why do I seem to turn into a different person when I get behind the wheel of a car?

Behind the wheel can be a dangerous place. When those of us who drive, drive, we hold the power of life and death in our hands. We operate a machine that can kill. The implications of what we do behind the wheel are far-reaching.

And so, it behooves us to do a little reflection, a little cheshbon ha-nefesh, a little soul-searching with respect to how we drive. This may sound melodramatic, but I believe that when we drive like maniacs we endanger not only ourselves and those near us; we also endanger the fragile threads of connectedness that struggle to hold our society and our world together.

What are the forces that contribute to our behaving badly behind the wheel? And how do we learn to remember to draw upon the goodness that we each possess—when traffic is literally driving us crazy? We behave badly behind the wheel for many reasons, two of which I’ll touch upon here. First, we are constantly subjected to a distorted view of what freedom means. Second, we misinterpret other drivers’ behavior.

First, we succumb to a distorted understanding of freedom. We Americans, for the most part, love our cars. We love to drive. We love the freedom of it, the independence of it.

There is a reason that car commercials often depict vehicles with lone drivers traveling open roads through vast, beautiful places. We are a freedom-loving, autonomy-seeking people. And what's more freeing than a pristine, unobstructed path through an inspiring landscape, leading to adventure and fulfillment? Our Declaration of Independence—of Independence—proclaims that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right, and so pursue it we do, in our cars, longing for the freedom of the open road.

Truth be told, I love to drive. I've driven cross-country, alone, more than once. I've driven from the South Dakota Badlands to the Escalante Grand Staircase. I've traversed the "Going To The Sun" Road in Glacier National Park. I've seen mountains and rivers and thunderstorms that have taken my breath away. And all of it sweeter for having seen it as a woman alone on the road—bucking stereotypes, asserting myself, claiming my freedom, my autonomy, my right to shape my own destiny.

I have a rabbinical school internship at a synagogue in Los Altos Hills, just north of San Jose. When I commute there, I have a choice. I can fly, which, when you add it all up, takes about four hours door-to-door. Or I can drive, which, when I take the 5 freeway through the Central Valley, takes about five hours and fifteen minutes. If I fly, I have to park my car in a satellite lot, take a bus to the terminal, go through security, and check in at the gate. If I'm flying Southwest, I then have to find a strategic place to wait by the entrance to the jetway so that I can be one of the first in my group to get on the plane, so that I can be sure that there's enough overhead bin space, so that I don't have to check my luggage, so that I can get out of the airport quickly, so I can line up at the rental car counter—and hope that there are no problems with my reservation!

Usually, by the time I've waited in all the lines and put up with all the hassle, I'm exhausted.

If I drive, I don't have to deal with any of that. I just get in my car and go. No restrictions on how much stuff I can bring, or what I can bring—I am in charge. There are times when that's worth the extra hour and fifteen minutes.

What do all of the hassles of flying have in common? They all involve interacting with other people. Other people who slow me down, get in my way, restrict my movement, and diminish my freedom.

No wonder we get so angry when we're driving along on a surface street and some idiot pulls out in front of us and proceeds to go slower than we want to go: He's in my way! She's boxing me in! Suddenly the freedom of the road is

denied. Symbolically, it's freedom itself that's gone. We can no longer go at our own pace, but rather are forced to make room for others, to consider the needs of others along with our own.

How can we not fall prey to this fantasy of freedom lost when we are constantly inundated with images of "freedom equals driving wherever we want, whenever we want, in whatever way we want"?

Fortunately, we know better. We know that on life's journey, unobstructed roads are as much of an illusion as a pristine wilderness with a road running through it. (Wilderness, by legal definition, means a roadless area!) We live amongst Others, and we all journey together.

These Others, we are reminded in the Torah, are created in God's image. In the first chapter of Genesis we read:

Vayivra Elohim et ha-adam b'tsalmo  
b'tselem Elohim bara oto  
zachar u-n'keivah bara otam.

God created humanity in God's tselem, God's image. In the image of God, God created it, male and female God created them.

The "minor" Talmudic tractate Avot d'Rabbi Natan provides some insight into how being created in the image of God might affect our behavior. We read that Rabbi Elazar says,  
"May the honor of your fellow human being be as dear to you as your own, be slow to anger, and repent before your death."

May the honor of your fellow human being be as dear to you as your own.

Applied to driving this would mean driving with other people's needs in mind—a very, very difficult thing to do when we are stressed, when we're late, when we have important places to be, when we've got bosses to keep happy, or when co-workers or family members are waiting for us.

Be slow to anger.

Behind the wheel of a car, it usually doesn't take much to rattle us—and with good reason. Cars can kill. One miss, one error in judgment, and someone can die. One near miss and we become necessarily protective of ourselves. We anger quickly, wondering why everyone else is so aggressive.

Repent before your death.

In the context of driving, we can interpret this literally: God, help us to see the words b'tselem elohim (in the image of God) in every windshield, on every license plate. (Like one of those yellow "baby on board" signs, we can visualize signs that read "divine image on board.") Help us to do this before we lose control, before we make that one little mistake that we (and countless others who would be affected) will regret for the rest of our lives.

Today is Rosh HaShannah, the birthday of the world, a day on which we commemorate the world's creation, and the creation of human beings in God's image. I pray that we will remember that freedom is not a free-way with no traffic.

On September 11, 2001, we learned something of what freedom is really about. Freedom is not doing what we want, where and when we want, how we want. Freedom is the freedom to embrace unpopular ideas, to question the policies of our government, to be devoted members of a minority religious culture. It should mean the freedom to be openly gay without fear. And with this kind of freedom (as we all know) comes serious responsibility to everyone around us—even those who are different from us.

On September 11th we saw just how seriously we Americans take our real freedom, and how well we understand the responsibility that comes with it. In the aftermath those horrible events we saw people step forward to help in any way we could. We consoled the bereaved. We sent money. Restaurants donated food. Rescue workers signed up for double and triple shifts. We saw first hand what freedom means in this world, not the world of car commercials. It meant being there with each other, embracing the Other. It meant that faceless business men and women became known to us as we read of their families, their interests, the lives they lost.

The fact of the matter is, there are no roads on which we are truly alone.

In addition to this distorted understanding of freedom, we also fall into aggressive driving when we misinterpret other drivers' actions.

According to one study, "Drivers symbolize exchanges with other drivers using a variety of metaphors of competitiveness, of victory and defeat. The attitude and language of competition in traffic transform ordinary activities [ordinary activities!] like overtaking and changing lanes into provocation and threat, accompanied by feelings of anger and vengeance." Does this sound familiar?

How often do we ascribe motive to other drivers?

"You saw that I was about to pass you and you cut me off on purpose!"

“You must be tailgating me because I made you miss that light back there! Get off my back and leave me alone!”

“What’s wrong with you? Can’t you see that I’m in a hurry! Don’t you know I’m going to be late? You must have pulled out in front of me just for spite!”

“Look at you, weaving like that. You must not care about anybody but yourself!”

Honestly, though, what do any of us really know about what another person is thinking at a given moment? Are other drivers really paying such close attention to me that they can tell what I want to do and then try to thwart me on purpose? Are they all really just waiting for my slightest mistake so that they can punish me? I somehow doubt it. Just this week I had a near miss at the intersection of Culver and Venice. I was going north on Culver, preparing to turn right onto Venice. A van in front of me and to my left signaled that it needed to get into my lane, so I braked and let it in. As I began to accelerate again, a black sedan sliced in front of me from the left. I braked fast, shocked. I thought that it had come within inches of hitting me. And then I got paranoid—was the driver angry with me for having slowed while the van switched lanes? Did the driver of that sedan slice in front of me to retaliate? I took a couple of breaths and realized that what had probably happened was that the sedan driver had thought that I was turning into a close by driveway rather than onto Venice, and so he or she had simply gone around me. But it was hard work to tell myself not to feel deliberately slighted.

All of these misinterpretations (as well as the distortions about freedom) are made possible by one significant quality of driving: its solitariness. When we get into our cars, we are all alone. Even if we carpool, we are in a world of our own, an Us versus Them world where other people can cease to be people. They become stereotypes: the elderly driver going too slow, the self-absorbed sportscar driver going too fast. Other people sometimes even become cars. That SUV is in my way! That Honda couldn’t be going any slower. That Buick is insane! Other drivers cease to have faces. They become simply Other, and the Other is always easy to dismiss.

Yale University law professor and social commentator Stephen L. Carter has written a book called *Civility*, in which he examines the self-indulgent nature of our culture and our apparent inability to consider the needs of others along with our own. The very first anecdote of the introduction is about driving, which the author contrasts with train-riding in this country during the nineteenth century:

Travel in those days was necessarily in groups. Nobody but the very rich could afford to travel alone. One bought a ticket and sat down in a train car full of strangers. Doubtless the excited passengers jostled each other for space, but although the Europeans were already looking down on American manners, it was

not yet the nation's fashion to be rude. On the contrary, this remarkable new technology worked as well as it did, moving the citizenry from city to city, because the travelers understood their obligation to treat other well. They purchased guides to proper behavior, like *Politeness on Railroads* by Isaac Peebles, and tried to follow its sensible rules: “Whispering, loud talking, immoderate laughing, and singing should not be indulged by any passenger,” was one. “Passengers should not gaze at one another in an embarrassing way,” ran another. Conductors were soon cracking down on passengers who “indulg[ed] personal preferences at the expense of other passengers.” Well, of course: to travel so far together, packed shoulder to shoulder like chess pieces in their little box, everybody had to behave or the ride would become intolerable.

I wonder what a liberal Jewish guide to driving etiquette would look like. It would certainly include the notion of *b'tselem ehohim*, our insistence on believing that we are all created in God's image. It would probably also include that famous discussion from *Mishnah Sanhedrin* which proposes that the reason that humanity was created first “as a single being [was] so that no one [would be able to] say to another, ‘My father was greater than yours.’” We are all made of the same stuff, and as the *Mishnah* tells us, “Whoever destroys a single soul, it is as if that person destroyed a whole world, and whoever preserves a single soul, it is as if that person preserved a whole world.”

Ultimately, we may not be able to change the habits of those with whom we share the road. We can't stop our fellow drivers from running red lights, tailgating, weaving, and yelling.

We can only monitor our own behavior, and measure our own responses. We can leave more time for our commutes, tell ourselves to breathe, turn off NPR and listen to something soothing, put down our cell phones, and visualize that yellow sign that says “divine image on board.”

We have come to the Days of Awe, our time for introspection, reflection, *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, taking stock of the soul. Our acts of *t'shuvah*—of repentance, of returning to the goodness within us—strengthen us, not only as individuals, but also as a community.

The same could be said about driving. When we get behind the wheels of our individual cars, I hope we can remember that we are actually part of a community—of other drivers, passengers, and pedestrians, and that our actions affect others, and have serious consequences. A little driving-*t'shuvah* could go a long way towards making our city safer.

In the Midrashic collection *D'varim Rabbah*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says, “When a man goes on his road, a troop of angels proceed in front of him and proclaim: Make way for the image of the Holy One!”

I hope that we can all be accompanied by angels on the road, reminding us of the divinity that we share.

Shannah Tovah.