



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Recalibrating Our Moral Compass

Each year the clergy meet with the Kindergarten class for a program where the kids get to ask us questions. The teacher sends us the questions in advance. I guess she doesn't want us to be stumped by a 6-year-old!

You can imagine the questions: *"Is a rabbi a job? Can a cantor have a pet? Do you ever go to sleep with your kippah on your head? How do you think of those stories you tell?"* And then, a few years ago there was one question that was truly out of the ordinary: *"How do I know I am right when I think I'm right? How do I know I'm wrong when I think I'm wrong?"*

Now, imagine me sitting on one of those little chairs with all of those cute kids, trying to figure out who was the insightful philosopher in the group. After discussing many others, I read this last question aloud and as I often do when in a bit of a pinch with kids, I turned the question back to them. What did they think? *"How do you know when you are right and when you are wrong?"*

I could see them really thinking and then one girl confidently responded. *"My mom says that we have a circle inside of us and inside the circle is a stick. When we do something right it tickles us and makes us happy. When we do something wrong, it pokes us and gives us a stomach ache."*

If that mom is here now, let me say wow! And let me thank you for bringing the idea of a moral compass to your child so aptly and so early in her life.

This great story has come to my mind many times recently - the image of the circle and the stick, the unmistakable feeling of affirmation for doing something good and the angst that comes with the awareness of our wrongdoings. I have been thinking about the idea of the moral compass as it is cited so often these days - in the papers, in the news, on Facebook. There is anger, fear and disappointment in politicians, spiritual leaders, doctors and teachers saying and doing things they should not. I hear a painful yearning for morality, civility, patience, and a sense of

our responsibility to the other. Has this innate tool been lost; why does it seem that so many of us have become detached from this inner guiding system?

I've been thinking about this lately too because many of us come to Temple on these High Holy days to reconnect to the values of our tradition and to recalibrate our personal moral compasses. I know that I do. I am well aware that we don't all share the same theology; not everyone here believes in the Biblical God, or the God of the Rabbis or any God. But I can say with confidence that most, if not all of us, greatly value our tradition's deep moral roots and ethical directives. We look out into today's world with deep concern. Where is the moral compass of some of our fellow citizens? We see injustice, greed and corruption. We see callousness. We desperately want a change in direction.

But how do we bring that about, and where do we start? Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, once shared his outlook on change based on an ancient Jewish teaching: When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world, I found it hard to change the world, so I tried to change my nation, I found that difficult, so I tried to change my town, that too was hard, so I tried to change my family. Now as an old man, I realize that the only thing I can change is myself. Now finally, I understand that if, long ago, I had changed myself, I could have changed my family and we could have changed our town, which might have changed the nation, which, finally, could have impacted the world. Given the day, it is particularly appropriate to start with us. Our best response to the moral dysfunction out there is to strengthen and improve ourselves in here. Today is about us; it's about you; it's about me.

Before we explore our own circles and sticks, let me say a word or two about compasses generally– both the physical ones and the moral ones. From what I understand, a real compass operates in response to the earth's magnetic field created by liquid iron deep in the earth's core. The north end of a compass always points to what is called Magnetic North.

Now you may be aware that in addition to Magnetic North, there is a second north – called True North. True North is the location of the geographic North Pole where all lines of longitude meet. Magnetic North and True North are not the same nor are they actually aligned. A force creates Magnetic North while True North is an

actual place. Quality compasses have two arrows: one that is automatically pulled to Magnet North and a second arrow that you have to set yourself in order to determine the direction of True North. And the distance between these two points is called the declination.

I understand how to determine each of these two ‘north poles’ on a physical compass. But the interesting question for us today is: how do they relate on a moral compass and towards which north are we, ourselves, aligned?

In addition to my own reflection, all of this got me thinking about today’s main character - Abraham and his actions. In our Torah portion we read that he brings his son up a mountain to be sacrificed. I want to imagine Abraham sitting in his tent early in the morning considering what he was about to do. Surely, he struggled with the decision? Was he wondering: Do I end my son’s life to prove my own loyalty to God? Or risk the consequences of rejecting this Commanding Voice? Where was Abraham’s moral compass directed? Is the Akedah a story of Magnetic North or True North?

(Let’s get back to us.)

In my exploration of this topic, I’ve have discovered that most people equate their moral compass with their conscience. Like my kindergarten friends, right and wrong are determined from a feeling inside – the tickle and the poke. Many popular writers describe our moral compass this way - as our sense of personal authenticity, what we need to do to be true to ourselves. As a result, moral decisions become very individual, very personal because, they are based on how I feel, what judgments I believe are right, what direction makes sense to me. Perhaps you can imagine most people’s moral compass as I do. If it is directed solely by our conscience, a force from within, it naturally aligns with Magnetic North, which is determined the same way, by a force within. Our conscience and Magnetic North become one and the same.

No surprise, Judaism sees the moral compass differently than most people. There is a circle and the stick and, as on a real compass, there are two poles. But Jewish tradition pushes our arrow off Magnetic North, past our conscience, to search for that other pole – True North. We are expected to step into the gap, the declination, and engage with the wisdom of our tradition and our world to reach

that farther, better place. On a standard compass, in order to calculate True North you have to know Magnetic North and so of course we begin with ourselves. But the goal is a location not defined by our individuality. True North is a communal place; it includes others; it visualizes the big picture, it integrates something more than the self. It reconnects us with our Godly values.

Were Abraham's actions guided by an internal feeling, a personal need? Or did he have that bigger picture in mind - Isaac, the Jewish people, humanity? What about our actions? When we look back on the moral decisions we have made this past year, how many came from our individualistic Magnetic North and how many were directed to the more communitarian True North?

As I think through this model, I am bothered by two things.

First, by the name – True North. It's distracting even confusing. True North suggests that the place where we are headed contains Absolute Truth – Capital A T! I don't see it that way. But the best I can suggest is that the True of True North indicates a locale that is as real and genuine and reachable.

Second, is the fact that I can't entirely pin point Judaism's True North. I can't tell you that it's Leviticus 19, or a tractate of the Talmud or even the Ten Commandments.

While it may not precisely be a fixed place, we know many of the coordinates that direct us there: Micah's call to do justice and love mercy; the oneness of humanity in the Shema; the image of God living equally in every human being; David's compassion for Jonathan; Esther's altruistic actions to save our people. Teshuvah, the theme of everything we do over these High Holy Days, which means turning – perhaps better – redirecting.

I realize that it is not easy to step away from our comfortable and safe Magnetic North? How do we cross the declination? Better yet, how do we position our arrow permanently closer to our moral ideal? The answer surrounds us at this very moment. We come here each year to be with one another and with the lessons of our tradition because, consciously or unconsciously, we understand we need redemptive assistance from outside of ourselves to move the needle or redirect the stick to the place of greater good. Redemptive assistance includes those many things

that serve as road signs to get us to True North. It comes to us from the wisdom and insights of sources beyond ourselves - people, ideas, traditions, all of which have the potential to be transformative and the capacity to close the gap between the self that we are and the one we could be; empowering us to change the world that we have into the one that we aspire to create.

The idea of redemptive assistance, that higher level of meaningful engagement, doesn't appear to be sought after enough out-there in the secular world. Perhaps this is why we feel the absence of a moral compass so often. But redemptive assistance is hard wired into Judaism. Our tradition is continuously directing us to look beyond ourselves for guidance and wisdom. Without it we remain at Magnetic North. With it we set ourselves on a path towards True North.

The most accessible resource for this is sitting right next to each of us. That resource is another person – our spouse, parent, friend, even someone we don't yet know. Engaging with others, learning from their experiences, dialoguing about meaning – all of these help us to grow and change and move, not in some random direction, but toward a more empathetic and socially responsive moral ideal. Redemptive assistance is just a conversation away.

Consider Judaism's idea of chevruta. In our tradition, we value studying – Torah, Talmud, poetry – anything. But Judaism says we should never study alone. Chevruta is the model of two people coming together to exchange ideas, to bounce thoughts off one another, to find answers together. The benefit of chevruta is magnified when your partner does not share your view and both parties question the source of the other's decisions. Might our Akedah have turned out differently had Abraham sat down to talk with Sarah early that fateful morning?

Whose guidance might you seek? Where do you want to add depth to your life? What would help you feel more confident on your own moral path? Redemptive assistance sits close by. And of course, you are someone else's resource. Many of you, knowingly or not, have been a resource for me. I have grown; I have been changed through your insights, your stories and your example.

To speak of the resources of redemptive assistance and not talk about the wealth of texts in our Jewish tradition would be rabbinically irresponsible. We could

line the walls of this room with the inspiring words of our prophets. We could sit for days reviewing the rich moral debates of the rabbis. All of that might feel overwhelming. Not to worry, each of us actually already has enough coordinates to identify our path ahead. Take Hillel's "what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor," align it with "we are all created in the image of God," add in "Justice, justice shall you pursue" and now we are on your way.

Perhaps for some of us, even more helpful than our commandments are our stories. Whether they are true or not, is not the point. Within them is potential for personal growth, we learn that people can change; we understand that one action can have far reaching consequences. My go to story is Joseph. As a young man he was entrenched in Magnet North, he was gifted but only saw the world through his own lens. In time he opened himself to the assistance of others; he learned from his experiences; he stepped into the declination and redirected himself to True North. He changed himself and by the end of the story he had changed his family and his nation.

And finally, we cannot complete this conversation without being curious about where God is in our calibrations. Earlier I acknowledged that there is a huge spectrum of thoughts about God among us. Some of us feel connected to an infinite force. Some of us are staunch atheists. I would imagine many of us are agnostics. Many might say that if we have this conversation without God in the mix we will find ourselves in a loop of moral relativism.

For me, True North is defined by and infused with Divinity. I have many questions and doubts about God and often feel most at home with agnostics, but for True North to be worth hiking towards, it needs a morality that is beyond me, a meaning that is beyond me. In the story of creation, God at first is alone, then God creates the universe and then God invites us to be partners in the continuation of creation, in the building of a moral world. Sacred myth, perhaps...yet this story elevates humanity, empowering us with purpose, dignity and the potential to be transformative like God. It may be challenging to feel the pull to True North if there isn't a 'greater-there-there,' a source of something sacred and altogether just. Perhaps the absence of that greater source and force has allowed us too often to

remain at Magnetic North where we make choices that are at times self serving, missing a sense of responsibility to and compassion for the other.

I began by sharing an experience I had with a wonderful and thoughtful kindergartener. Let me end with another true story also about an insightful kindergartener. This child was sick in bed for a day. To fill the time sitting alone, his father brought him a pocket compass. The boy lay there shaking and twisting the odd contraption, curious about the arrow and its power within the circle. "A wonder," he thought. "The invisible force that guides the compass needle is evidence that there is more to our world that meets the eye. There is something behind things, something deeply hidden, something that exists in the space that had always been considered empty." That kindergartener was Albert Einstein.

Like Einstein we are intrigued, inspired and guided by our compasses. Day in and day out we make moral choices. Day in and day out we trek through that space, crossing the declination; we travel beyond ourselves towards a place of purpose, justice, kindness and right. On this day, we come together to reset our moral compasses. We reach out to one another and our tradition for the redemptive assistance we need to embark upon a meaningful journey so that next year we will find our community and ourselves that much closer to our collective True North.

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