



Kol Nidre – 5778
Two Jews Walk Into An Elevator

By Rabbi David Klatzker

My friends,

When I was a rabbi in California, a congregant told me that he had been driving on a highway when he heard on the radio that there was an amber alert. The police were looking for a possible child abductor, and they gave the license plate of the suspect's SUV, and asked people to call if they saw it.

My congregant thought to himself, "That's terrible, but what are the chances that I would find that car? It's like finding a needle in a haystack; I'd have better luck winning the lottery. Anyway, I've got to get to where I'm going." So he decided not to bother looking for the SUV. He said to me, "In retrospect, I know that I did the wrong thing. As soon as I saw my own children, safe and sound, I felt guilty that I didn't look for that SUV. Am I a bad person?"

"No, of course not," I responded. I told him not to be so hard on himself. I suggested that he could use a sort of mantra, a few words that he could repeat to himself every day, to cut through all the noise and be reminded of the kind of person he wants to become. A brief statement of what his purpose is in life, to help him stay on track.

This is similar to what is called an "elevator speech." Imagine that you are in an elevator. You have anywhere from 30 seconds to 2 minutes—the approximate length of an elevator ride—to describe an idea that you have, or market yourself as an individual to the people on the elevator with you. And preparing this elevator talk is also a way for you to remind yourself of who you are.

I think of the Shema as a kind of elevator speech. Moses says, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Ehad*. The words are clean. The words are easy to learn and carry with us. "Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one."

If you say that twice a day, morning and night, as our tradition teaches, you will know that you are attached to something larger, to the Source of all being, and that there is no "secular" realm where God's presence cannot be felt. You will feel a deep sense of connection with other people and the world around you. The Shema is a great elevator speech, in just six words.

Another wonderful elevator speech is Rabbi Hillel's response to the potential Jew-by-choice who said, "Make me a convert, on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot." Hillel said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary; go and learn it."

I take Hillel literally here. If your understanding of Torah or your living of Judaism does not make you more compassionate, then you are misinterpreting Torah and not practicing Judaism. The underlying aspiration that runs through Torah is to teach us kindness.

Now, my friends, imagine that you are in an elevator. How are you going to describe to your fellow travelers on the elevator what your goals in life are? How are you going to define your mission, why were you placed on this world?

When I ask this question to teenagers and college students, many of them have trouble with it. After all, they've never been asked to do anything like this before. They've thought about success—financial success and accumulating lots of “stuff”—but that end game already feels rather shallow to them. They had a Jewish education, so they focus on the reminders—prayer, tefillin, kosher food, fasting on Yom Kippur. But no one ever asked them what those things are meant to remind us of. What's the ultimate purpose of the mitzvot?

Let me share my elevator speech with you. It comes from the Hebrew prophet Micah:

*What does God ask of you?
Only to do justice, love kindness,
and walk humbly with your God. (6:8)*

I think everything is in Micah's pithy statement. ‘Do justice and love kindness’—that's how you should relate to other people. ‘Walking humbly with your God’—that's how you can make a connection to the divine. You won't feel a connection if you are full of yourself. You have to leave some room for God.

Everyone should develop this sort of elevator speech. We need to determine our trajectory, so that we won't drift aimlessly. I think that is why our Yom Kippur prayers keep reminding us over and over again that we are mortal. As Unetaneh tokef puts it, we are like “a passing shadow... a vanishing dream.” It is as though the Mahzor book is asking us to write our own eulogies. When all is said and done, what do we want others to have said about us? How do we want to be remembered by a child or spouse, a friend or colleague? What kind of life do we hope to achieve?

And there is another reason why we need to focus on our purpose nowadays—because we live in such a stressful social and political climate. There is so much uncertainty, so much that we don't have control over. We can't manage North Korea or Iran, we can't foresee the next terror attack, we can't predict the stock market, we don't have even the slightest influence on the tweets coming out of the White House.

But, instead of worrying about such matters, we can focus on something that will inspire us to live productively. We don't need a long business development plan with twenty things that we can do to improve our situation. All we need is a simple reminder of our goals in life. The way to thrive is to have a purpose.

This also applies to synagogue life. As most of you know, I am the transitional rabbi here. My job is to help prepare the way for a new, settled rabbi, who will arrive a year or two

from now. I don't have a lot of time, so I feel that everything I say to you is a kind of elevator speech.

And what I want to say to you is this: We all know that synagogue life is challenging today. Membership is down everywhere, budgets are tight. But we have to remind ourselves that the synagogue is not a business. Businesses are focused on profit, but we are focused on service. To us, the outputs, the things we provide the world, such as the wonderful young Jews we are creating here in our religious school and the joyous and loving spirit of our Shabbats together, are more important than the inputs, the number of new members or the number of spots in the parking lot.

Not everything can be reduced to numbers. We need to remind ourselves continually of our commitments, and how well we are carrying them out. I think our weekly announcements at the synagogue should say something more than "Shabbat services are at 9:30 am." We should say something like this: "This week three of our teenagers are raising money for guide dogs. The rabbi and hazzan are visiting the sick. The Sisterhood is supporting rabbinical and cantorial students at Jewish Theological Seminary. The Men's Club is collecting food for Project Isaiah. The Hesed Committee is providing rides to doctors' appointments and to shul. Several of our members serve on the boards of organizations that provide hope and healing to others." And so on.

If we were to put a sign on the door (as many synagogues implicitly do) saying "Come on in—we're all about fulfilling your personal wishes," then at some point we would have to tell people that in fact the opposite is the case. The purpose of the synagogue is not to satisfy everyone's individual preferences, which would be quite impossible for us to do anyway. Some think the air conditioning is too cold, others think it is just right. Some want a shorter service, others are happy with the length. If the synagogue is going to thrive, we need to look at the big picture and focus on the reason why it exists—which is to help us do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. The shul should be evaluated on the basis of what it contributes to the world, and how it helps people grow as Jews and human beings.

If you liked my little elevator speech, why not adopt it as the synagogue's New Year's resolution? Why not adopt it as your personal theme for the year to come? It will probably work better than what many of us do at the High Holy Days, making an overwhelming and disconnected list of all the things we want to change.

Would you repeat these words after me:

What does God ask of you? (all repeat)
Only to do justice, (all repeat)
love kindness, (all repeat)
and walk humbly with your God (all repeat).

Let's all say those words together: *Do justice... Love kindness... And walk humbly with your God.*

These words of Micah are so simple. You know them now. Repeat them at home and when you're on the road. Keep them in your wallet with the credit cards. Inscribe them on the wallpaper of your cellphone.

So, my friends, do you want to reinforce your commitment to do the right thing the next time you hear an amber alert, because that's the kind of person you really are? Do you want to reduce your anxiety about what you read everyday in the newspaper and concentrate on living a life of meaning? Are you willing to look beyond your own personal comfort and help us focus the synagogue on its real mission?

Let this be a year when we act on our elevator speech, devote ourselves to it, and share it with others. Make it visible, audible and tangible. Wherever we are, on an elevator, on the highway, or anywhere else. *To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.*

Amen.