



Yom Kippur 5780: Connecting the Dots

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I never thought I'd buy a minivan. Yet there we were in the dealership on a Friday afternoon, on what turned out to be the day that Shelley would go into labour.

I'm still not sure if walking in with a spouse who is nine months pregnant helped or hurt our negotiations – though she is always a great negotiator. But we signed on the line, went home, lit the Shabbat candles, had the baby, and a few days later, had the keys to a minivan in our hands.

I really hadn't thought my forties would be the minivan phase of life. It's not that I was contemplating a little red sports car; I figured these would be my Prius years. But here we are, with a minivan and three kids in the back.

Now, Rona Nadler, our phenomenal music director, and I meet every week to discuss services, but every now and then we also talk about life. One week, as I was sharing my automotive angst, she showed me an article. The title was: "Parents, Just Buy the Damn Minivan."ⁱ The author, a car salesman, recounts:

About once a month someone says to me, "Now that I have kids, I think I need a minivan, but I really don't want a minivan. What should I buy?" Early in my career my answer was, "Well, you should probably buy a minivan." Most folks don't like this answer, but more often than not it's true.

He has learned, he says, to recommend crossover SUVs so as not to lose clients – but he calls them "M.A.Ms (Minivan Avoidance Machines)." When advocating for minivans, he makes the case for sliding doors ("a simple concept, yet so wonderful") and captain's chairs ("a separation zone"), but then he cuts to the quick. "You are not cool anymore," Tom McParland, the car salesman, says. Now this may not be a surprise to my kids, but it was a big surprise to me. He writes:

I know why you want to avoid the minivan, because to give into that type of vehicle means that you have to come to terms that you are now older, more mature, and thus have entered a different stage of your life that is not exactly easy. Minivans are meant for one type of person, parents. SUVs and crossovers are for people that go on "adventures" and fill their car up with "antiques." But I'm a car consultant not a therapist that is going to help you work out your mortality issues. You are a parent now, as much as you want to think that you are one of those "cool, hip, new-age, daddy/mommy blogger" parents the fact remains that when you transport children and their gear convenience and safety will soon take priority over some fleeting sense of youth.



Ouch.

It's hard to be the age that you are. There's a great story in the Talmud about a man who is married to two wives, one young, and one old. The young wife pulls out his white hair, and the old wife pulls out his black hair, and he ends up completely bald.ⁱⁱ As I begin to find more salt in the pepper of my hair, I try to learn from this story. Other than the obvious lesson of not being married to two women at once, it seems to me that there's wisdom in embracing the "middle" part of middle age, instead of trying to deny it.

And so I looked in the mirror, patched up my wounded pride, and bought the damn minivan.

Now, I'm not a car consultant. Or a therapist that is going to help you work out your mortality issues. But I *am* a rabbi, and if there's any day we deal with our mortality issues, it's Yom Kippur.

And I've been thinking to myself this year... if it took such an effort for me to get my head around a change that came with a joyous moment in my life, how much harder it is for us when our circumstances are not full of joy, but full of pain.

Lynda Jeffries writes about the "exhausting and heartbreaking" experience of caring for her husband, who has had dementia for the past five years; how the man who was her rock has become her full-time responsibility, his memory full of holes. One of his repetitive activities, it turns out, is asking her to marry him – unaware that they are already married. Finally, she agrees. In her reflection on the first time she married him, in light of the second, she writes:

I never could have envisioned this scenario when we took our wedding vows on Valentine's Day 1990... When we said the words "for better, for worse — in sickness and in health," neither one of us had any idea of where the journey of life would take us. Who does? Most wedding vows are words that have not yet been defined. Luckily, Curt and I had a lot of good years together... We were looking forward to retirement. But, as John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans."

Our plans for the "golden years" included traveling the world, taking "encore" college classes, becoming community volunteers, hanging out at the gym, and spending more time with our family. Never did we plan for the life we're living now.

But they are living it, and she is determined to live it fully. Thirty years after their original marriage, she writes,

I was one happy bride. Watching my husband partake in the flow of real, shared connections brought me much joy. Being surrounded by a circle of friends who genuinely care for us made me feel incredibly blessed. Recommitting to the promises I made so long ago was an emotional moment. Tender, poignant and reflective. Our marriage vows have been tested — and the center still holds.



We crawled into bed late that night, but I was still floating. “I love you” I said to Curt as I closed my eyes.

Reaching for my hand, and placing it over his heart, he whispered back, “The feeling is mutual.” Those are the most romantic words I’ve ever heard. These days “happily ever after” comes in small moments. I’m learning to cherish every one of them.

There is a line, an invisible one, between their first marriage and their second; between the vows and their fulfillment; between the big moments and the small ones. And every moment where he still recognizes her, where he says he loves her, is another shimmering thread.

Just as, in my life, there is a line between that minivan, and the hopes and dreams I had as a child. Back then, I thought there was a real line, solid and straight, like one of those timelines on the wall of a history class, that would show me what to do when: the best time to get married, the right time to have kids. If you had told me then that I would be divorced and remarried, and that I would become a parent first in my 20s, again in my 30s, and once more in my 40s, I would never have believed you. Now I just contemplate the range of ages of our kids and relate to the novelist Dara Horn’s brilliant flash of insight: “I’m going to be the Tooth Fairy until my own teeth fall out.”ⁱⁱⁱ But I always loved family and road trips and excuses to sing in the car, and that minivan gives us enough space so the kids won’t kill each other, plenty of USB ports, and great acoustics for singing (the USB ports, for the record, are so the kids can plug in devices and not have to hear me sing). I feel like I’m exactly where I should be. As David Bowie, a man who reinvented himself his whole life, said: “Aging is an extraordinary process whereby you become the person you always should have been.”^{iv} The moments that matter most are the ones where we find meaning, where we understand who we are and why, and how it connects to who we were before.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum shares the experience of watching her daughter connect the dots for a drawing. In that moment, she realized: “there could be a world in which things connect.”^v The Hebrew word for hope, *tikvah*, she teaches, is connected to the word for line, *kav*. We connect the dots, she suggests, with lines of hope. We take a world that doesn’t make sense, and we connect the dots so that we can see the full picture, a picture we couldn’t imagine when we first began.

One of religion’s most audacious, *chutzpadik* claims is that there is order in the chaos of the world and of our lives; as my teacher Rabbi Neil Gillman writes, “the function of religion is to discern and describe the sense of an ultimate order that pervades the universe and human experience.”^{vi} He too uses the image of connecting the dots, to make sense of how we talk about God. God is a pattern we can see in the universe, he suggests, if and when we choose to look. The dots are not numbered, and so there are many possible ways to connect them. “But the various patterns that we uncover in connecting the dots are not invented. They are out there to be discovered.”^{vii}



Yom Kippur, this day when we reflect on our mortality and the entirety of our lives, can help us connect the dots. And hope is the line that connects them.

When I was a newly ordained rabbi, if you had asked me what creature I would have used to express the image of hope, it would have been a butterfly. Starts as a caterpillar, transforms in a cocoon, emerges into beauty. But now I think it would have to be a spider, weaving webs and revealing connections. Nature writer Margaret Renkl tells it best:

A small gray spider has pitched an elaborate camp at my work space in the family room... A better housekeeper might be distressed about sharing space with a spider, but I love her. The world is on fire... “Breaking news” is a term that has no meaning anymore — it’s all as broken as broken ever gets — but the tiny spider in my family room goes about her... business in the perfect order of things, unaware of the chaos unfolding beyond that window.^{viii}

There are spider webs on the porch of our new home. I see them every time I slide that magical minivan side door shut and come up into the house. I can’t bring myself to destroy them. Two are especially breathtaking in their design, with a small tunnel at one end of each web where the spider watches and waits. I look at them, and I see how the dots can connect.

There is a story that David, long before he became king, asked God why spiders were created.^{ix} God replies, somewhat mysteriously, that one day, David will understand. Lo and behold, years later David is running for his life, and hides in a cave. A spider emerges and quickly weaves a web over the front of the cave, so the soldiers who are chasing David assume no one is inside. According to the story, at this point David kisses the spider, thanks God, and goes on his way.

We don’t always get our miracles. I recently spoke to someone who said that this year, he has been unable to even open his prayer book on the High Holy Days; he’s been sitting in synagogue with the book closed on his lap. He recently got bad news about the health of his daughter, and the prayer book, which in the best of times didn’t make sense to him, is now an active source of offence. How dare we speak of God as the source of order in the universe?

But what happens when we see prayer, not as a statement of fact or even belief, but as an expression of hope? What if being here helps us connect the disparate dots of our lives, to reveal an image not predetermined by God, but with holiness still in its design?

In Rabbi Elad-Applebaum’s words:

The siddur is a stethoscope to hear the heart.

The siddur is a shell which we can hold to our ear and hear our ancestors, telling us we are not alone.



The siddur is an alarm clock, making sure we don't get stuck... we need to *do* hope, not just dream hope, no matter how much we want to stay in bed.

Because if we look closely, we will see lines – lines of connection between our past and present and even our future selves. Lines of connection between each other. Lines of connection between our world and the world as it should be. Lines of connection between us and God. *Kavim shel tikvah*. Lines of hope.

Generations have showed up on Yom Kippur and sat in these pews and hoped. Their hope is what makes this place holy. Year after year we come here; we come raw from our losses or almost paralysed by boredom or overflowing with joy or chased by fear, and our lives are nothing like we imagined they would be – sometimes they are better, and sometimes they are worse – but we come. Some years, the best we can do is sit here with our prayer books closed. But we come. And we hope. *Our* hope is what makes this place holy.

And the minivan? I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's holy too. One of the first things I did with it was use it for an adventure. I piled in with two of my kids (not the baby) and three of their cousins, and we drove to a meeting point and went white water rafting in the St. Lawrence River, where the waves gave me much more of a sense of my own mortality than I had bargained for. And a few weeks after that, Shelley and I folded the seats down to transport our first sukkah. We are solidly in the midst of our lives as a blended family of five; and I can only hope to meet whatever challenges may come with the courage and resilience I see in so many of you, each and every day. I can only pray to keep connecting the dots, using the lines of hope.

ⁱ Tom McParland, "Parents, Just Buy the Damn Minivan," *Jalopnik*, Sept. 23, 2014 (<https://jalopnik.com/parents-just-buy-the-damn-minivan-1597502940>).

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma 60b.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rebecca Long, "An Interview with Dara Horn about *Eternal Life*," *Jewish Women's Archive*, Dec. 18, 2018 (<https://jwa.org/blog/bookclub/interview-with-dara-horn-about-eternal-life>).

^{iv} Cited as the epigraph in John Leland, *Happiness is a Choice You Make: Lessons from a year among the oldest old* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

^v Rabbi Tamar Elad Applebaum, "Leadership of Hope in a Time of Despair," Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, Jan. 30, 2019.

^{vi} Neil Gillman, *Doing Jewish Theology* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008), p.3.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p.12.

^{viii} Margaret Renkl, "The Spider in My Life," *New York Times*, July 23, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/23/opinion/spider-in-my-life.html>)

^{ix} Ben Sira 23b, Otzar Midrashim 47.