

Time for Recommended Maintenance
Rosh Hashanah 5770 1st Day
Rabbi Ari Sunshine
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A few weeks ago, we were getting ready to go to Ocean City for the weekend and I had a realization. I hadn't brought our family car, a Honda Pilot, in to be checked in some time, since everything was running well, and I figured it would probably be a good idea to get a thorough inspection done, oil change, tire rotation, etc., BEFORE we took the three hour driving trip. So I dropped the car off with my mechanic early in the morning, figuring everything would be smooth and easy, I'd pick up the car around lunch time, we'd load it up, and then head out to the beach. That all sounded great until I got a call from Mike the Mechanic mid-morning time (no, music fans, not Mike and the Mechanics—fortunately I did not need a “miracle” ☺) who told me—“yeah, Mr. Sunshine, you need new brakes—the front brakes need to be replaced right now before you go, though you can safely wait on the rear brakes until after you get back”. After a brief moment when I was mentally going through the process of figuring out if we could get everything into the Nissan, Mike reassured me he could get the front brakes done by lunchtime, so all was well in the land of trunk space. ☺ True to his word, Mike got the front brakes done, the oil changed, the tires rotated,

fluids topped off, etc., all by lunchtime, enabling us to leave in the afternoon as we had planned.

After we got back from the trip, when I had a little more time to go over the car's recent maintenance record, amongst my car documents I came back across a letter from the original dealership in Charlotte that I received quite a while back and never tossed. The letter began: "Dear Ari Sunshine: Following the recommended maintenance schedule for your 2003 Pilot is the best way to help ensure your vehicle's optimal performance.... Our records show your 2003 Pilot is due for the following service—6-month Honda Recommended Maintenance". What is included in this 6 month maintenance? The service department will change the oil and filter, inspect the brakes, and inspect steering and alignment, among other things. The letter also reminds me that there is a free shuttle service provided, early-bird and night drop-off available, and that I should call to schedule a service appointment that's convenient for me. It all sounds pretty painless when you put it in those terms, though maybe my default expectation is: dealership service department = EXPENSIVE AND INCONVENIENT. This might explain why I would be reluctant to make an effort to bring my car into a dealership for a checkup, but it certainly does not explain why, even here in Olney, where I have a mechanic who does good and prompt work within a

couple of miles of our house, I still find that I have trouble consistently making the effort to keep up with the maintenance schedule.

Why is that the case? It's a combination of factors, really; partly it's just because we've been busy, partly because there are certain days we need both of our cars; and principally because the car appears to be performing very well and therefore we haven't felt the urgency.

The maintenance of a car that seems to be running well may not seem particularly important in the overall scheme of things, but I think it offers some very important insights into the penitential season through which we are now traveling. Many, perhaps most, of us proceed through our daily lives figuring that we, like our cars, are running smoothly. But in the past year, how often have we stopped for our own "recommended maintenance"? Have we inspected the day-to-day course of our lives, the way we prioritize, the way we treat others, and the way we relate to God?

Now, it goes without saying that we could and should be doing this throughout the year, not just periodically. This would help reduce the chances of a literal or figurative "breakdown". After all, just like we are supposed to check our car's oil constantly, as Jews we are instructed to say the penitential prayers, *Tahanun*, almost every weekday morning during the year. But the reality is that most of us don't check our oil, nor recite

penitential prayers and take them to heart by examining our behavior, on a daily basis. For our cars, it is likely that many of us depend on the reminders we get from our car dealer telling us, “it’s time to get this thing looked at”, or do it in hurried, last-minute preparation for a long trip. For ourselves, we depend on the Jewish calendar and the penitential period of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to remind us that we are overdue for self-inspection, all the more so since we’re about to set off on another trip—the journey of the next year in our lives. Undoubtedly we’ve all heard the sentiment about the Jewish holidays coming “early” or “late” in a particular secular year—or maybe “middle” this year? 😊--, and then the astute follow-up that the holidays actually always come at the same time in the Jewish calendar, and it’s really just a question of whether we’re ready for them or not. Well, ready or not, inspection and maintenance time has arrived, right on schedule.

For a proper and thorough inspection, we need to make a checklist like the one we use for our cars. First, how are our brakes working? Second, how is our steering and alignment? And third, does our oil need to be changed?

Let’s start with our brakes. We all have them, but we don’t use them often enough. We zip around from home to office to school to activities to

errands to socializing to home as a matter of habit. We interact with peers, coworkers, classmates, employers, and family in a whirlwind of activity, often as if we are just going through the motions. We use our brakes when we stop racing through the days of our lives, look at ourselves more critically, and look at the world around us with more gratitude. What might it take for us to appreciate as much as we should the miracle of our very existence, to treasure the loved ones and even the beautiful art in the world that surrounds us, and to desire to infuse our life with greater meaning?

As a case in point, consider this true story that some of you may recall happened just a couple of years ago here in Washington, D.C..

Thanks to my colleague David Greenspoon for reminding me of, and summarizing, this fascinating story. It's a few minutes before 8 a.m. on a cold Friday morning in January. At L'Enfant Plaza's Metro Station, a nondescript guy in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap sets up as a street musician playing violin, open case at the ready on the floor in front of him to accept donations. The acoustics in the station are kind to the six classical masterpieces rolling off the strings, recognizable not for their melodies but more for their innate beauty that has defined them as lasting classics. In the next 43 minutes, 1,097 people walk by this anonymous fiddler. Leonard Slatkin, the music director of the

National Symphony Orchestra was asked, hypothetically, what he thought would occur if one of the world's great violinists was performing incognito under such condition. He felt reasonably confident that a crowd would gather and the street performer would end up with \$150.00. The reality turned out to be quite different. Seven people—not even a *minyan*—stopped for at least a minute. Twenty seven gave the violinist some money, most of them on the run. That means 1,070 people hurried by, oblivious to the beauty of the music and the mastery of the musician. Exactly one person stopped, because she recognized him, having seen him perform at the Library of Congress earlier that week. The musician was Joshua Bell. The violin was his Stradivarius. The entire episode was staged by *The Washington Post*. And the average, working American passed by a man who has played before the crown heads of Europe, who three days before had filled Boston's Symphony Hall where the low-end decent seats went for \$100 each. Bell's performance fees can average about \$1000 a minute. On January 12, 2007, he was just another street musician whose 43 minutes of virtuoso performance netted him a whopping total of \$32.17. People LITERALLY gave him pennies. Two days after this article in *The Washington Post* appeared in the spring of 2007, Bell returned from another

tour of European capitals to accept the Avery Fisher Prize as the best classical musician in America.

Why is it that we have so much trouble slowing down, stopping, and appreciating beautiful things in our lives and in our world? Can't we recognize beauty right in front of our eyes? And if we can't, if we just keep walking right past it while moving on to the next thing in the grind of our days, what CAN get us to stop and look closely at our lives?

The Jewish tradition offers us a great reminder in the form of Shabbat. Every week Shabbat comes to remind us to take it slow. While the merry-go-round of our society keeps spinning around, we jump off from candle lighting Friday night until Havdalah Saturday night in order to celebrate the miracle of creation, to rejoice, to sing festive songs, and to spend time with friends and loved ones. Shabbat is a weekly opportunity, and also a weekly reminder, to do just the kind of reflection which keeps our lives on track. It is a time to think about what our lives mean; to think about the purpose of our being; to appreciate the wonders of the universe; to feel the warmth of friendship and to feel the love of those whom we hold dear. When we carve out time and space and make Shabbat and its values a part of our lives each week, we are regularly making sure to use our brakes.

Next, it is time for a steering and alignment check. Do we know in which direction we're traveling? Do we have a destination in mind for our lives and are we properly aligned to reach that destination? And, for that matter, do we even know our current position—where we are now? A humorous story illustrates the importance of knowing where we are. The skipper of a sinking pleasure boat near Chesapeake Bay radioed repeatedly and frantically for help. “We’re on our way,” the Coast Guard replied. “What is your position?” The yachtsman answered, “I’m Executive Vice-President of the First National Bank. Please hurry!” ☺

To the yachtsman, position referred to his job and societal status; to the coast guard, position referred to where this person’s boat was sinking and where he should be rescued, no matter who he was or what job he held. The yachtsman missed the proverbial “boat” in his inability at that moment to recognize that he was nothing more than a man on a sinking ship.

The powerful shofar blasts that we will hear tomorrow remind us to ask ourselves where we are, and where we are going. Maimonides, the famous 12th century Jewish physician and philosopher, employed the metaphor of an alarm in characterizing the wordless call of the shofar: *“Awake, you sleepers, from your slumber. Rouse yourselves from your lethargy. Scrutinize your deeds and return in repentance. Remember your*

Creator, you who forget the eternal truth in the trifles of the hour, who go astray after vain illusions which cannot profit. Look well into your souls and mend your ways". The sounds of the shofar grab us by the shoulders and shake us. They demand that we stop what we are doing and look inside ourselves and all around. Do we know who and where we are, after an honest self-assessment of our accomplishments in our personal, family, professional, and spiritual lives? Are we in tune with ourselves as to which aspects of our character are doing well, and which need work? Are we treating the people that we interact with daily—family, friends, coworkers, people in service industries such as restaurants and retail, with the respect and dignity that we would like accorded to us? And if we know where we are, do we know where we're going? What goals do we have for our lives? Are we working hard for the right things and setting the unimportant ones aside? In life, as in boating, the difference between steering and drifting comes down to whether or not we know our present position and our destination, and are thus able to adjust our course between them. So I ask again: are we going in the right direction? Or are we just going forward aimlessly?

Finally, once we have checked our brakes and our alignment and steering, we must change the oil. In our cars, after a while the oil gets dirty,

and leaks out or gets absorbed, leaving us with the possibility of the unpleasant consequence of a dry engine with metal running against metal. ☺

So every few months we need to change the oil and its filters so that the engine will continue to run smoothly. Our lives are much like the engine in need of new oil; if we don't replenish or refresh that which enhances the smooth spiritual functioning of our lives, namely talking to God through prayer and listening to God through studying Jewish texts, then our lives may be deprived of much potential meaning and critical guidance. At our yearly checkup, now is the perfect time to consider davening more frequently, whether it is on Shabbat or perhaps even one time daily at *minyan* at shul. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew verb describing the action of prayer, "l'hitpallel", literally means "to self-assess". When we pray, we not only communicate with God, we also communicate more openly with ourselves. Likewise, by committing ourselves to engaging in some form of regular Jewish study, either privately or in a class setting through one or more of the myriad of adult education opportunities that we offer here at BSO, we are opening our hearts and minds to the laws, customs, and wisdom of a tradition that is more than 3000 years old. In the process we will gain valuable insights into living more meaningful and complete daily lives.

To help us get our year started moving towards the goal of increased facility with both prayer AND study, we have two relevant fall adult education classes that begin as soon as the holidays are over—Tuesday evenings we will be offering “Praying with Purpose”, an in-depth exploration of the development of prayer, the synagogue, the siddur, and the structure and meaning of the prayers that we still use in our liturgy today; and on Thursday mornings I will be teaching “What’s Bothering Rashi?”, when we will be examining each week’s Torah portion through the lens of the fascinating analysis of the famous 11th-century Bible commentator Rashi. Let these and other courses we offer, and the regular worship services we hold, be the metaphorical “oil change” that helps make sure our spiritual engines don’t break down.

The hardest part of maintenance is the same with people as it is with cars. It’s not so easy or convenient to make the time to truly inspect our attitudes, behavior, and our lives, any more than it is ever truly “convenient” to get the car into the shop for its checkup. It interferes with our normal schedule and throws everything off, and to boot we may seem to be doing just fine and not even feel like we need the exam! But the fact that it is inconvenient doesn’t eliminate the crucial need for maintenance, whether corrective or preventative. If something inside us is broken or not

functioning properly, now is the time to fix it. If we're showing unusual wear and tear, we ought to address it now before our complex inner self breaks down altogether. And that's where the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah*, the ten penitential days beginning with Rosh Hashanah and culminating in Yom Kippur, fit in. These days are our "free shuttle service" and our early-bird and night drop off. They provide us with CONVENIENT opportunities—even force us—to reflect on the words of our *mahzor*, the themes of the prayers, the clarion call of the shofar, and the melodies that range from regal to solemn to haunting. These days bare our very souls for inspection, if we will only allow ourselves to take a closer look. So consider this your reminder letter from the dealership. Don't wait for a breakdown—check your brakes (so that you can slam on them and stop in your tracks if necessary!), check your alignment, and change your oil. May this time of "recommended maintenance" be one that you use constructively and introspectively, and may each of us chart a course for a year filled with feelings of gratitude and appreciation, a sense of purpose and direction, and a revved-up sense of spiritual engagement and connection.

L'Shana Tovah Tikatevu v'Techatemu—may each of us be inscribed for a blessed and sweet new year.