I have something to admit to you, something I have been concealing too long. Although I claim to look down on others with this addicting habit, I am no better. Yes, it’s true. I love to watch the reality show “The Amazing Race”. Teams of two run around the world, immersed in culture and navigating the unknown. There is a thrill in vicariously traversing the world, pondering how I might fare if were faced with the same puzzles and challenges the contestants undertake to complete each leg of the journey. As seasoned watchers of the Race will tell you, it doesn’t matter how strong or clever you are – what wins the day is clear communication and the ability to read a map. Racers do not have the luxury of phones or apps to guide them through unfamiliar terrain. They have a compass and a paper map and the goodwill of passersby to point them in the right direction.

When this show first began, in late 2001, orienteering with an atlas was probably more common than today. If my family ever needed more comprehensive instructions in those days, we had to go on MapQuest and print out the turn-by-turn directions. In the latest season of Amazing Race, a contestant is driving aimlessly through Austria when they exclaim “I need my iPhone!” It is true, our devices make it so much easier to find our way around. With Google maps or Waze, there is never any fear of getting lost. If I should miss a turn or detour around construction, my phone will not reprimand me for going off course. Rather, a gentle voice will say recalculating. But our phones do not tell us where we are going, only how to get there.

Technology provides us with convenience, but also takes from us the opportunity to learn. Should the unthinkable happen and a phone battery die while we are traveling, how will we get home? But also, when we rely on our phones to guide us to our destination, we may not be able to fully experience the journey. When we fix our eyes on our phone screens, we may miss amazing sights right in front of us.

Jewish tradition seeks to give us tools for navigating life. There are many possible routes and countless attractions along the way that pull us off course. If we are too focused on the ultimate destination, then the journey may all be for naught. But we won’t know until we get there. No one expects us to traverse the path of life perfectly. Each year we are gifted with the chance to recalibrate, recalculate, and get back on track. Teshuvah is often translated as repentance, but the literal meaning of the Hebrew is returning or simply turning. When we lose our way on the path of life, we might retrace our steps, turn around and return to the last familiar landmark, following the breadcrumbs we dropped (unless they have been swept away by taschlich). Sometimes, though, we cannot simply turn around; we need to reorient ourselves and plot a new course that will eventually merge with our intended route. And sometimes it can be hard to see that far down the road.

Teams on the Amazing Race try to keep track of where there are in the pack. How many other teams are in front of them, how many threaten to pass? But if they focus on this hierarchy, they become distracted from the task at hand. Each can only run their own race. Each leg features roadblocks, U-turns, detours, and the occasional flat tire that can completely change the outcome. Rabbi Rick Jacobs reminds us that detours can be revelatory. Consider the story of Moses working as a shepherd in the desert. He was pursuing a wayward lamb when we turned off the path. Only then when he was going away from his intended route did he encounter the unexpected. A bush was burning before him and yet the flames did not consume it. Only when he was on this detour did he first receive instructions from the divine. A divergence from plans can be life-changing. Then again, Moses wandered in the desert for 40 years, so we should not necessarily rely on his navigational skills.

The problem with this metaphor of turning is the suggestion that there is only one “right” way to go. Many times the so-called path of life is seen as a straight and narrow route. According to Nachman of Breslov, All the world is a narrow bridge. When our plans do not pan out or we choose to pursue the unexpected, this is considered a divergence from the expected. But who is to say what is the only path ahead? I see this metaphor applied to careers and life cycle events, but obviously not everyone seeks to climb the corporate ladder or pursue a traditional definition of family. Part of the turning process is not only recognizing the legitimacy of the diverse routes ahead of us, but also granting that the paths we are on may differ from that of others.

On the Amazing Race show, the contestants frequently are so attuned to searching for clues and race markers that they neglect to appreciate where they are or the people with whom they interact. The obvious pun hiding in the show’s title is that racing around the world may be enjoyable, but in the end, it is the human race that truly astounds. In the coming year, I hope you will help me remember that real life is not like reality television. As we help each other navigate unexpected and planned detours, let us return to our community values and in turn allow our tradition to guide the way forward. In 500 feet, turn inward.