JEWISH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

There is no cruise control in leadership

By Steve McKee

Straightaways are easy. It's why they invented cruise control. But "set it and forget it" is a sure way to end up in a ditch, where no organization wants to find itself.

Yet many do, as somewhere along the way they lose sight of the fact that the straight and smooth stretch of road they've been enjoying is the exception, not the rule. We can't always know when the next curve is coming, but remaining alert to potential dangers can be a lifesaver.

This was brought home to me all too viscerally one dark night as I drove the twists and turns of Atlanta's Chastain Road. It was the night before a wedding in which I was the best man, and the maid of honor and I were following the bride and groom to the rehearsal dinner when a teenager who had been drinking was coming the other way and crossed the yellow line. He hit us head-on.

I can only imagine what the soon-to-be-married couple were thinking when they turned their car around and sped back to the site of the crash, expecting to find their dear friends in no state to stand in a wedding — or worse. By the grace of God, we were both OK, though not without some bumps and bruises. It had all happened in an instant, simply because the other driver mismanaged a curve.

Making curves safer

Daniel Findley works hard to prevent accidents like that. He has a PhD in civil engineering and is a licensed professional engineer. He's also an adjunct professor in the Department of Civil, Construction, and Environmental Engineering at North Carolina State University and associate director at the Institute for Transportation Research and Education. As the author of Highway Engineering: Planning, Design, and Operations, you might say Daniel wrote the book on road safety.

When it comes to literal turns, Dan is the man. As he puts it, "I'm a curve guy. I'm obsessed with taking pictures of curves because that was my dissertation. I took seventy-five hundred pictures on our [three-week vacation through Wyoming and Idaho] and probably three thousand are transportation related. That's what I enjoy."

We may feel sorry for Daniel's kids ("What, Dad, we're stopping again?") but we can be grateful for his wealth of know-how about road design. "Given the choice," he says, "[engineers] will always build a straight line. And you see that in states that don't have many obstructions. The roads are perfectly straight. That's what we prefer. Much more simple."

And safe. While intersections are the most common location of automobile crashes, curves are a close second. They're especially dangerous on two-lane roads — more than twice as likely to result in a fatality.

Findley works to prevent collisions like that, speaking unassumingly about tangents and traverses, arcs and radii. He explains the Long Chord, the straight-line distance between the turn's point of curvature and point of tangency. And he highlights an important part of most curves, superelevation, which refers to the level of banking in a turn.

Most drivers never notice that highway turns are banked, particularly on Interstates, which have been designed to smooth out variations on both straightaways and turns. But on winding mountain roads, there's no way to miss them. The higher the speed and the tighter the radius, the more help the driver needs in navigating the turn; hence, more superelevation.

The benefit of superelevation

Findley told me about the Tail of the Dragon, a stretch of U.S. 129 connecting North Carolina and Tennessee and bordered by the Great Smoky Mountains. It's famous for having 318 curves in an eleven-mile stretch and as a result is a popular motorcycle and sports car road. Without careful attention to superelevation and other aspects of road design — including frequent signs warning of speed limits and upcoming curves — the Tail of the Dragon would be notorious for something more than fun.

Professor Findley gave me new respect for the engineers who have developed best practices over decades to keep drivers safe. Unlike clearly marked roadways, however, most turns in business come with no pre-posted warning signs. We must look for signs ourselves, whether it be metaphorical moss growing on the side of a tree or skid marks left on the pavement by those who've gone before us.

Even with life's predictable turns, however, like the changing of seasons, the sweep of a secondhand or pages turning over on a calendar, nothing remains exactly as it was. That's why examining a broad swath of turns throughout science and history, in art and religion, on the battlefield and the playing field, can be so helpful — fateful turns and their consequences are part and parcel of every human endeavor.

Becoming more alert to the turns of our past won't only help us grasp what may be happening now, it will help us make better decisions at the crossroads of the future to which we come.

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