

The fact that I have a terrible sense of direction is but one of several character flaws that I manage to keep hidden from most everyone but my own family -- though our Israel trip participants will, by now, have their suspicions. During my early years here in Gainesville, and in other cities before this, finding my way to an unfamiliar address, after dark, was a regular and true terror, and pretty much unavoidable. I remember several particularly piquant early Gainesville experiences in Haile Plantation, where the streets coil around like serpents, are poorly

lit, and where whatever kind of cell phone I had back then did not work very well. If you are one of those people whose home I visited six or seven years ago, you probably don't want to hear the obscenities I was muttering as I finally pulled up in front of your house.

I could have bought myself a GPS unit, I suppose, but they were still pretty expensive seven years ago, and more of an admission of weakness than I was prepared to make at the time. Gainesville, with its numbered streets and avenues, didn't seem like it would be so

difficult to master. And I have mastered it, more or less, even with its shortage of north-south through streets. The part of the problem that persists is rather more subtle than actually getting lost. I can get from my house to almost anywhere without suffering serious angst, and I can get from Temple to almost anywhere, and I can get back home or back to Temple from almost anywhere. But going from one unfamiliar place to another unfamiliar place can still be terrifying. To go from a home not my own in the Duck Pond, for instance, to an office not my own off

Tower Road, let us say -- that is an occasion, still, for fear and trembling, and sometimes for the most embarrassing kind of back tracking, just to find a route with which I am comfortable.

Three or four years ago, well after the time it would have been most helpful, I did, actually, receive a GPS as a gift from my parents, and I loved the calm assurance of the female voice with which it spoke -- I called her Beatrice.

But Beatrice's interface was clunky, and her batteries did not last very long, and her

dashboard bracket kept coming loose. It became very easy to leave her behind, especially after I got my iPhone, which is always in my pocket and has 10,000 different navigation apps for every imaginable circumstance. You can navigate to Mars with that thing! So I bought myself an iPhone bracket that would snap onto the handlebars of my motorcycle, and I use it often, even to get to places I really should know by now.

All the foregoing is meant to explain my particular fascination with the network of

Global Positioning Satellites, and my feeling, too, that there is something theological about them. What an idea, after all -- a voice from heaven just when one is most in need of guidance! The voice of halacha, in Jewish religious parlance -- the righteous path one must follow in order to reach a sacred destination. The Talmud is full of stories about voices from heaven -- is it possible that our rabbis knew about microprocessors and satellites in geosynchronous orbit?

Of course, if you have ever actually relied on a GPS system, you know they aren't all they are cracked up to be. They get confused sometimes:

recalculating...recalculating...recalculating.

If this were God talking, we would hope He would not have to recalculate so often. And they suffer from embarrassing gaps in knowledge: "no such address exists in the database," Beatrice would tell me sometimes, and then what was I supposed to do? Worst of all, sometimes a GPS will lead us completely astray, leaving us alone, no direction home, a

complete unknown, like a rolling stone, as
Bob Dylan used to sing.

There are a thousand jokes -- you don't need
me to tell you -- about the American male
reticence to stop and ask for directions. The
GPS makes it even worse, creating the
illusion, as it does, of having a direct pipeline
to true divine guidance. Even women get in
trouble now. I heard a story a few months ago
that made me laugh, even though it is not
really funny when you think about it. This is

from the printed transcript of a story that was broadcast on National Public Radio:

"Each summer in Death Valley, California, a quarter-million tourists pry themselves from air-conditioned cars and venture into 120-degree heat to snap pictures of glittering salt flats. They come from all over the world, but many have the same traveling companion suction-cupped to their dashboard: a GPS.

"But when dozens of abandoned dirt roads lie between you and your destination, things can get tricky. That's what Donna Cooper, of

Pahrump, Nev., discovered last July on a day trip to Death Valley.

"After a long day, Cooper and her family asked "Nell," the GPS, for the shortest route back to their home. "Please proceed to the highlighted route," Nell said. But what came next did not compute. The GPS told them to go 550 feet, then turn right, Cooper says.

"Well, at 550 feet it was like a little path, and then it was like, go a quarter of a mile and turn left. There was nothing there. She had me running in circles for hours and hours and hours," she says.

"Death Valley Ranger Charlie Callagan says Cooper is not the only visitor who's relied on GPS and been seriously lost. It happens a couple times a year now...

"Why is the GPS going astray? To explain, Callagan drives out to a lonely corner of the valley. A line pops up in the corner of my GPS screen. Supposedly, it represents a road about to intersect the one we're driving on. But looking out the window, there is no other road; that road probably hasn't existed for 40 years, but somebody ends up driving on it because it shows up on their GPS.

"In 1849, Death Valley got its name when a wagon train from the east tried to find a shorter route to California, and got lost.

'Somebody had a map, and somebody said, this is a faster way to get to the gold fields,' Callagan says. 'Deep down back in the brain, the common sense says, you know, this is not the wisest thing.'

"A search and rescue helicopter found Cooper's family after three days of being lost. Everyone survived, except Nell, the GPS. And yet, Cooper has not lost faith. She has a new GPS now, named Rosie.

There are times, for sure, when we could all use some guidance, geographical and otherwise. Even though I finally know all about the limited north-south routes through Gainesville, I still need help sometimes. And even when we are quite sure of the general layout of right and wrong, even when we are sure of our fundamental principles, this is still a very complicated world. There are always all sorts of special circumstances and exceptions. What is the best way to get from the Shands medical office at Magnolia Park on

39th Avenue to the Hampton Oaks office on 62nd Avenue alongside the Oaks Mall? This is not a trivial questions with or without GPS guidance. How will mall traffic be today – are we near the start of a UF term? What time is it – will I run into dismissal time at Buchholz High School or Terwilliger Elementary? What is the state of road construction at the Newberry Road highway ramp? God himself might not know the answers to all of these questions. Effective navigation requires all kinds of real-time data collection, sophisticated application of decision making

algorithms, and subtle mid-course corrections. To get anywhere successfully one simply must retain a strong element of independent fact-checking and decision making. That's what I do -- except when my wife is in the car with me, of course. Then she calls the shots.

And this is not even to mention the non-geographical guidance we might need. How do I adjust my life and marriage to accommodate the fact that my children no longer live at home? How do I handle the fact

that my parents are growing so old? What do I do about the dimming of my own eyes, the aches in my own bones, the things I no longer remember if I don't write them down – and then I forget where I wrote them! What God or man or machine will tell me these things? How to trim the federal deficit? How to deliver health care? How to achieve our vital goals in Afghanistan?

No such man or machine exists, I'm afraid – and so such God, either, who will tell us such things straight out, and certainly not a

Beatrice or a Nell or a Rosie (apologies to you, Rose Koenig). As a general principle, when it comes to guidance through this complicated world of ours, this is what I believe: that rigid obedience to any voice that claims exclusive authority is not guidance at all, but mis-guidance. This goes for the voice that claims to be the voice of God, or for the voice of a GPS, or for the voice of a political orthodoxy, or even for the voice of individual conscience unmoored from social checks and balances. The world is just too complicated to believe that there is any one immutable source of

truth. Our minds are made for real-time data collection, sophisticated application of decision making algorithms, and subtle mid-course corrections. Our minds are made for us to use them, not for us to offload them to third-party processors.

Donna Cooper and her family – the GPS lady – are very fortunate. They went astray in a dangerous place but they lived to tell the tale. But by now there have been GPS fatalities in Death Valley, and elsewhere. People who believe they hear the one voice of truth

committed massacres in the name of God.

They have abused our political process. They have been swindlers and charlatans and downright crazy people whom people like us have followed all the way to oblivion.

What all of this points to is the danger of trusting to the whispers of a well-modulated voice as an exclusive source of guidance.

Better to be lost a little bit but still thinking, than to be blindly following a voice from on high. Even in Haile Plantation after dark.