

Yom Kippur 5774- The Reboot

Rabbi Stephen Wise

Its late summer and I'm finishing up a sermon on my laptop. All of a sudden – the screen freezes. Then it goes blank. Uh oh. I push escape, there is no escape. I push control, I have no control. I push every single button one at a time. Nothing happens.

There I was, staring at this beautifully crafted piece of plastic that has taken my soul. A cold sweat ran down my back. I picked up the phone and called up Microsoft. "Help", my voice cracking, tears forming at the corner of my eyes. "My computer. Its broken, nothing works". They said, "sir, please calm down". "Have you tried to reboot?"

Like its that easy, I'll just pull the plug and then plug it in again and.....oh. Well how about that. HmMMM. I meekly told the analyst that everything was fine. He said, "sir, it happens all the time. If something is broken, don't worry about it, just reboot".

And you know what, now I reboot all my devices. My iphone froze. What to do? There's little door that opens up on the side, you straighten out a paper clip, stick it in the tiny hold all the way, and poof, the phone reboots and you're good to go. Blackberry broken, reboot. Your cable box not bringing in all the channels, reset it. The modem isn't connecting to the internet, pull the plug, reboot, and you've re-established the connection, ready to surf the web once again, good as new.

After about thirty years of technological advances in personal computing, creating smart phones and computer chips so small that 13 billion of them can dance on the head of a pin, this is the great technical wisdom of our time: restart. Just about every glitch that you might encounter can be remedied by re-starting. I know this has happened to every one of us. So just when you're about ready to hit the roof, do yourself a favor. Turn off the machine, and start over. Re-boot. You'd be amazed at the cleansing effect a good re-start can have on a modern technological device.

Now let's imagine if life had a restart button. I would love to just open a little door on the side of my daughter during a temper tantrum and restart. It would certainly make things easier. Anytime things aren't going well, you could just hit a button and mistakes would be wiped out. When every hi-tech company from Cogeco to Apple to Microsoft is able to promise that everything works properly when you reboot, how come we can't reboot our lives. How come we can't do the same when life get complicated, when our hard drives get stuck, when we are frozen, when connections are lost.

I may not be a hi-tech wizard, but as your rabbi I can assure you that all of us do indeed have a reset mechanism. It may not be as simple as pushing a button but we Jews have been given a wonderful gift, and it happens right now, its called teshuvah. What is Teshuva. It's the chance to see where we missed the mark, to ask forgiveness for our wrongdoings and change our behavior. God had this Jewish restart button created at the beginning of time, (sing song voice) as the Talmud says, even before the world was created, God first created teshuva. The world could not exist if we didn't have a mechanism to rectify our mistakes, as learn from Rabbi Avraham Twersky. Teshuvah brings us closer to each other, to self-awareness and closer to God. It is the vehicle by which we achieve forgiveness. Humanity cannot function optimally unless we have a way to rectify improper behavior towards others.

Its funny to think that this is what we do on our New Year. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, our Yamim Noraim, are not celebrated like everyone marks the new year, with gifts and parties and music.

Is it not ironic that the most popular Jewish worship day, when 90% of us come to shul to pray - we have to fast and repent our sins. On our most popular holiday we're starving, yet we turn out in droves.

It's something my Christian colleagues can't figure out. Their biggest turnout is Christmas day when everyone is happy, well-fed and barraged with toys and presents. We come here and berate ourselves. It may have something to do with guilt. Guilt is something all Jews understand. We actually look forward to a day when we can squirm in our seats because of all the sins we committed over the past 12 months. There is something profoundly moving and beautiful about this day. It's not about depriving ourselves of food and happiness. It's when we don't focus on those things, that we can turn inward and focus on ourselves. It's time to search our hard drives, and find that restart button, to take stock of the life we led and the life we want to lead.

There is an early Hasidic legend, about a man named Gershon who lived on the shores of the Black Sea with his wife Fayga. Now Gershon was not the best person he could be. He made mistakes, not huge ones, just common ordinary mistakes - a broken promise, a temper lost for no reason, and a little untruth here and there. But unlike most people, he never regretted what he did. He never apologized and never asked for forgiveness. It became a habit and he paid no attention to how he treated others. Every Friday he swept all his thoughtless acts into the cellar.

Once a year on Rosh Hashana he stuffed them all into a large sack, dragged it to the shore and tossed them in the sea. But selfishness and thoughtless deeds are not so easy to dispose of.

Meanwhile his wife Fayga was never able to have children. So Gershon went to see the Rabbi, Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, a Tzaddik, who lived in a faraway village. Along the way he met a stranger who showed him the way, but of course he didn't say thank you. He got to the Ba'al Shem Tov and burst in the door without knocking. "My wife and I want a child" he demanded, "I hear you can help us, name your price and I'll pay". The tzaddik frowned. "you cannot buy children but let me see what can be done". He closed his eyes and began to pray. Finally he said, "be thankful for what you have and don't ask for more". Gershon cried, "what kind of answer is that, tell me why I can't have a child?". The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "do you think you could live so thoughtlessly. The sea cries out, for you have polluted her and your recklessness will cause you more sorrow".

"I'll take that risk" Gershon replied selfishly. "Foolish man", the Tzaddik replied, "in a year your wife will give birth. But enjoy them for five years, because on their fifth birthday they will go down to the sea...I can't say any more". Gershon turned white and fell to the tzaddik's feet, "what will happen in the sea, give me a sign". The Tzaddik said, "on the day you wear two socks on one foot and storm around the house looking for the missing sock is the day". "Oh thank you" Gershon kissed the holy man's hand, "I will remember your words and repent for my wrongdoings". "I hope you do" the Ba'al Shem Tov said as Gershon left, but sadly shook his head that Gershon would probably not change his ways.

Gershon returned home and forgot the tzaddik's words, except the promise of children. After one year Fayga did give birth, to twins, a boy and a girl - Joseph and Sarah. They grew healthy and strong spending summers running on the beach and swimming in the sea. Gershon however continued his thoughtless behavior, throwing each misdeed into that sea. Five years passed and one morning Gershon awoke and put a sock on. With the sun directly in his eyes and the heat overwhelming, he sat back down and without thinking and drew his second sock over his first one. Then he grumbled looking around, "where is my other sock". He stormed through the house "who has taken it?".

"no one took it" Fayga laughed, "you have two socks on one foot". Gershon turned pale as he remembered the tzaddik's warning. "where are the children" he asked frantically. "they went down to the sea as al-

ways”, fayga answered. As soon as he heard this, Gershon raced out the door. He saw his children playing but the sky was turning dark. Gershon saw rising out of the sea a black monster, with scales like iron plates. Written on each plate was each of Gershon’s misdeeds. Gershon raced to the shore and threw himself in front of his children and faced the monster. He pleaded for forgiveness. “please have mercy” he cried, “don’t punish my children, I am to blame”. And finally for the first time in his life, Gershon truly felt sorry for all of his wrongdoings. He knelt down and awaited his punishment. At that very moment, the monster melted into raindrops that fell like a summer shower. He took his children home and then went into the basement. He scrubbed every crack and corner where he had stored his thoughtless acts until every trace of his old ways were gone. He scrubbed his soul until it shined. Never again would he push his wrongdoings away and throw them in the sea. He faced each one and dealt with it, and never saw that monster again.

It is never easy to turn away from old habits. And so today is our time to understand why we behave the way we do and fix our shortcomings. To reboot.

Does it work? Are there buttons we can push? I believe there are. We humans have a remarkable ability to change if we set our mind to it. Think of the powerful life changes for people in the 12 step program for recovering alcoholics. Rabbi Twersky recalls a man standing up in an AA meeting who was celebrating two decades of sobriety. He said “the man I once was drank, and the man I once was will drink again. If I ever go back to being self-centred, dishonest, conniving and manipulating, I will drink again. I don’t drink now because I am not the person I once was”. That marks an incredible restart.

I have a cousin who has belonged for years now to a group called Eaters Anonymous, and for years he has not only kept off the weight, he is at the point where focusing on food and his next meal doesn’t consume him anymore. He now mentors others who are entering the program to not just eat healthy or diet, but to change the way they approach food, to control it so it doesn’t control them. It has truly transformed his life and those around him. That is a restart.

Perhaps one of the biggest changes I have personally witnessed are individuals who want to convert to Judaism. These are people who have grown up in a faith, but have found that it does not reach them, or doesn’t make sense, or does not provide the meaning they desire out of life. They have made a major decision to learn all about Jewish history and Israel, follow all the rituals and join the destiny of the Jewish people. They have truly transformed their identity. These Jews by choice have actively changed their life path, and in many ways are so engaged in their Judaism, it’s almost hard to believe they were born of another faith.

Today we are supposed see where our life is going, to recognize the path we are on, to see if our behaviours are hurtful either to ourselves or to others. Then with that understand, we do a spiritual reboot, to change behavior and find a new paths. And it’s hard. When your computer restarts, we demand it go back to the original path and its microprocessor doesn’t have to say sorry and understand why it made a mistake and try not to do it again. It just goes back and starts again. But we are different. We are not computers, our restart takes time and patience. Its worth it. Think back over the year, how many times would you like a do over, to take back something you said, to do it a different way, to have something undone. Now is the time to try. Like the Hassidic tale of Gershon, it might take a dramatic moment to understand how our behaviour affects us and the people around us. Or it might be something as simple as a conversion, perhaps found within a support group, where we can lean on each other to find the right path together. Or its deep down inside of you, a recognition that this is the time and we have the strength. While we can never restart completely and cleanly like a computer, we must treasure the opportunity we have each year at this time try. Don’t let the opportunity pass you by.

Shabbat Shalom.