

ROSH HASHANA EVE 5774
TESHUVA
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

In Pesikta deRav Kahana, a 5th century Midrash, Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua said: “It is the way of the world that when a man insults his fellow in public and after time wishes to be reconciled with him, the latter says, ‘You insulted me in public, and now wish to be reconciled when we are alone. Get the men before whom you insulted me, and I will be reconciled with you.’ But not the Holy One, blessed be He. For though a man stand and blaspheme and revile him in the market place, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: ‘Do Teshuva when we are alone, and I shall accept you.’”

This message is indeed the message of the Ten Days of Penitence. In the 8th Chapter of the Mishna of the Yoma Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah teaches: “From all your sins before the Lord shall you be clean (Leviticus 16:30), that is, for transgressions between man and G-d the Day of Atonement procures atonement, but for transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement until he has pacified his fellow.”

We come today on the eve of Rosh Hashana to recognize that we are not perfect and that we have erred this past year. If we have hurt another human being it is our responsibility to make amends with that person on our own. All the prayers that we will utter in the next ten days will not help. It is only transgressions between us and G-d that these ten days will procure atonement.

This evening I would like to suggest two terms from modern technology that we should keep in mind to help us on this venture. The first is “reset”. As we all know, in electronics and technology a reset button is a button that can reset a device. On our personal computers it clears the memory and reboots the machine forcibly. It allows us to start over. We are given another chance. But in order to do so, we must first recognize our mistakes and then act to clear the slate. Then, and only then, can we reboot and start over again, hopefully, this time, to do the right thing.

Many times I love the reset button for it allows me to literally start from the very beginning without my previous mistakes being present. Other times, it bothers me that when I press that reset button I lose everything and must start from the very beginning once more having lost some memory data. From a Jewish perspective, the reset button, Teshuva, the act of repentance, allows us to recognize the past without it being totally wiped out and, at that same time, to begin again with a clean slate. If we take it seriously it is the best of reset buttons.

The second term from modern technology is “route recalculation”. Many times as I am driving around the streets of Highland Park trying in the dark to find a certain address, I will hear a friendly but forceful voice stating to me “route recalculation.” It means I have made a mistake, I didn’t follow proper directions, and now it is going to give me another opportunity to find my desired location. Sometimes, it is frankly disturbing and annoying because I think I know the route better than the invisible voice in the GPS. Yet, usually it does take me to the right place, if

I am willing to follow the directions and have a little patience in making my way to my destination.

As Virginia Hefferman wrote in Yahoo news, “There are no whys in GPS land. We’re just here; we’re just doing this; and we’re doing it together. There is just a start point and an end point, and they keep changing. The end becomes the start, and vice versa.”

“Route recalculation” reminds us that we’re just human. We make mistakes. It is possible to reach our destination, but it is always good to know how to get there. Should we make a wrong turn there is always a chance to turn around, to turn back, or to make the famous u-turn. The concept of Teshuva is very much the same. We may be moving towards a desired place, performing a desired action, and then we make a mistake. “Route recalculation” reminds us that we have another chance. We can turn ever so slightly or sometimes rather abruptly and reach the desired location, if we so wish. It reminds us that there are various paths in life. We don’t always have to choose the most direct one, but we should choose the correct one.

These two new terms in technology are not found in Talmudic or Midrashic literature. Yet, they teach us the important lessons of these days, that it is possible to have second chances, to improve our conduct, and do better in the year ahead.

Rabbi Brad Hirshfield, who grew up in this congregation, writes, “Rosh Hashana offers an important alternative to the dominant culture’s responses to past events we wish we could have handled differently or seen to a better conclusion. Rather than naively wishing the past away, as many new-age gurus would have us do, or holding on to stubborn self-righteousness which sees change as a sign of weakness, as so many others would have us do, Rosh Hashana celebrates the possibility of endless second chances without pretense regarding the past.”

As we commence this New Year of 5774 let us take advantage of these second chances. Let us reset our behavior and recalculate our route. We can be better people, we can be better witnesses to G-d’s presence in our world, and we can make this world a better place for all. Such is our challenge as we come here on Rosh Hashana eve. May these days be meaningful and may 5774 be a year of great blessings for us all.