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**Neilah Yom Kippur
5 October 2022**

A Reboot: How Do We Do It?

Friends all:

G'mar Hatima tova—the greeting for Yom Kippur—may we all be sealed for good!

To those who are here in person at B'nai Israel and to those who are with us “virtually”—one united community in the spirit of Yom Kippur—Please know how deeply I cherish this opportunity of speaking with you. I am especially grateful to my dear colleague, Rabbi Michael Safra, for this invitation and for the friendship that we have shared for over two decades.

I have often wondered why the High Holy Day season continues to have such a powerful impact on us as Jews—reaching its emotional crescendo now at the Neilah service of Yom Kippur—with its metaphor of the “closing of the gates.”

Here is my theory: It is tough out there in our stress-charged American society, and most of us are struggling simply to maintain a measure of stability and equanimity. Our world is awash in problems—and many of us also have our own personal challenges—all playing out on our consciousness. In the midst of that ongoing psychic assault, the High Holy Days beckon us with the possibility of a “reboot.”

How do we do it? There is no simple formula—but I do believe that there are strategies deserving our consideration—and all of them are rooted in the core values of Judaism.

Life is about people. It is not coincidental that the word for life in Hebrew—Hayyim—is in the plural. We gain purpose for ourselves when we transcend our inherent individualities and bring caring concern, compassion, and love to others. Even a pandemic does not quell these deep human needs. On the contrary, it accentuates them.

For us as Jews, community has always been writ large. It is the forum where we can find partners who will share with us in what I

like to call God's work—Tikun Olam—making a difference, improving our world—even if it is just our little corner of it.

In Judaism, we are also gifted with a framework of actions that can provide both direction and fulfillment.

One of the results of the pandemic has been the emergence of almost unlimited and easily accessible opportunities for learning, literally 24/7. Whether on our computer in the privacy of our home or in a more conventional classroom, study of the extraordinary heritage which is ours in Judaism can both lift the soul and expand the mind.

Prayer, or in a broader sense, the quest for the spiritual—can be experienced anywhere. Amid the throes of each day and all those emails in our in-box, we must try to carve out—even briefly—a few moments for pause, reflection and growth.

The Mitzvot of visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, reaching out with our resources to those less fortunate—those Mitzvot, and many others—never go out of fashion.

Last week, as the day waned and the sun was setting, I was driving west on Montrose Road. The sky was streaked with magnificent pink cloudbursts. My mother had an expression drawn from her childhood summer in the Swiss Alps. She called such a painting in the sky “Alpenglow.” All around us, nature offers us many examples of its grandeur—to see, to enjoy and to re-energize ourselves.

Finally, if I had to summarize why the High Holy Days grab us each year, it is because deep down, most of us aspire to be a “*mensch*.” Along the way, we get distracted, even diverted from the goal. Fortunately, our yearly Jewish wake-up call helps us to reposition.

Abraham Joshua Heschel who was my teacher at JTS and whose writings have influenced me and so many others, perhaps put it best:

“What message have you for young people?” asked Carl Stern of NBC in concluding a television interview with Rabbi Heschel shortly before his death.

Rabbi Heschel replied:

“Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power and that we can all do our share to redeem our world, in spite of all absurdities, frustrations, and disappointments.

“And, above all, let them remember” he said, “to build a life as if it were a work of art.”

It is a message not just for young people but for all of us at Neilah and indeed for every day of our New Year.