

Rebooting our Operating System
Yom Kippur 2019 Rabbi Sarah
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Shana Tova. Shall we begin with baseball? Many a Kol Nidre night, I have stood up here in the height of baseball excitement - either for the Giants, or my beloved Chicago Cubs. Or both, at the same time. But alas, this year, that's not the case. The Cubs and Giants are done for this season. Both teams are getting new managers, and likely making a lot of changes during the off season. It seems it's time for both teams to REBOOT.

I use the term, "reboot," intentionally. It's actually what I want to talk about tonight. Our need to reboot. And Yom Kippur as a laboratory for doing it. But before I go further with the Jewish part, I want to, cautiously ... talk technology.

As you may know, I'm married to a computer scientist. So what this means, of course, is that when any family member, near or far, has a problem - with their computer, their TV, or any technological device, they call Scott. And what never ceases to amaze me, is that no matter what the problem, Scott starts with the same advice. Turn it off. Turn it back on. And let it reboot.

In preparation for this sermon, I asked Scott, "Why does this work? How does turning off a device and turning it back on fix so many problems?"

He explained that most of the time, the device's program is stuck. Maybe there's a bug in the program itself. Or, more likely, there's a situation that the programmers didn't plan for, and that the program just doesn't know how to handle. So the program gets stuck.

“How does rebooting get it unstuck?” I asked.

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Well, it clears the memory of the programs that are running. Whatever’s in those memories, that’s causing them to act incorrectly, gets erased. Then it starts from the beginning.

Scott then took out a piece of paper and drew me a diagram. At the bottom, he wrote, “start.” That’s where you turn on your machine. From there he drew an arrow up to something called a “boot loader.” This, he explained, is a very basic program, embedded in your machine, that’s job is to load and launch your operating system. From the boot loader, he then drew an arrow up to “operating system.” This could be Windows, Android, MacOS, (iOS, Unix) The operating system is the foundation for all the other programs you run. From there, he then drew lots of arrows upward, to all the different applications you might run - email, your internet browser, games, and the dozens of other programs you have running on your device.

So when you reboot, he explained, you reload all the original programs, including the operating system itself, and each one gets a fresh start.

Amazing! I thought. We can do the same thing.

We human beings are running so many different programs in our lives. I’m running the rabbi program. The mom program. The wife program. The daughter program. The friend program. The citizen of the world program. You’re running your dozens of programs. Inevitably some of our programs

reach situations they don't know how to handle. And we get stuck.

Tonight is our chance to push the power button. To shut down all the programs, and to start reloading our operating system. Judaism can be our operating system. Judaism gives us the principles and the practices on which everything else can run. Judaism actually gives us the tools to reboot ourselves, not just today, but any day of the year.

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Tonight I want to talk about three of these tools. We find them all in one High Holiday prayer, the infamous Unetane Tokef.

Sing: *B'rosh Hashanah yikatevun, uv'yom tzom kippur yechatemun*. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, On Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live, and who shall die. Whose life will be long, whose life will be short....

For tonight, I want to look past the determinism of this first part, and focus on the punchline. הרזגה עור תא יריבעמ הקדצו הליפתו הבושתו. But repentance, prayer, and giving, can transform the harshness of the decree.

I don't believe that t'shuva, tefilah, and tzedaka will cure us of cancer. I don't think that's how it works. But what if we read "decree" as the challenges of our lives, those places that we're stuck, those situations that our programs haven't yet learned how to handle. **Tshuva, Tefilah and Tzedaka are the Jewish tools to get unstuck. T'shuva, Tefilah, and Tzedaka are our tools to reboot.**

So let's begin with T'shuva. Repentance is counter to the culture we're living in today. Our leaders and politicians are models of anti-t'shuva. They do anything to avoid admitting they were wrong. The Torah models the

opposite. Tomorrow, we'll read in the Torah about the Kohen Gadol, the most honored leader of the Jewish people, confessing his sins on Yom Kippur. While the Torah doesn't include his words, the Avodah service, from 2nd Temple times, does.

V'kach haya omer, Thus would the Kohen Gadol say:

אָנאָ, יתאטח, יתיוע, יתעשפּ, רינפל יתעשפּ "Please God, I have sinned, I have done wrong, I have rebelled before You, I and my household. Please God, forgive my sins."

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This confession was part of what we often call the Scapegoat ritual, whereby a goat was sent off to the wilderness, symbolically carrying away the sins of the people. I just want to note the problematic evolution of this term, "scapegoat." In English, "scapegoat" means blaming your sins and problems on someone else. In the Torah, it's the opposite. It's about owning your sins, and trying to atone.

Also, the Kohen Gadol doesn't say, "I'm a sinner." He says, "I have sinned."

Judaism sees sin as wrong actions. Things we have done that we regret. Not who we are. It can be hard to internalize this distinction. Our minds so easily jump from "I did something bad," to "I am bad." From "she's mad at me because I did that," to "she hates me and will never forgive me."

But Judaism insists, nothing we do is irredeemable. Even our most awful misdeeds can be atoned for with t'shuva. - Admitting what we did wrong. Apologizing. Doing whatever we can to fix what we have broken. And

rebooting. Learning from our mistakes and choosing a different path.

A friend of mine told me an amazing story about t'shuva. He was studying at a yeshiva in Jerusalem for a year, and there he met someone who was a real "ba'al t'shuva." He was "ba'al t'shuva" in the (colloquial) sense of having become Orthodox. And he also was doing a lot of t'shuvah. For he had spent much of his teen years robbing apartments around Jerusalem, stealing TVs.

When my friend met him, he was on a different path. He studied talmud with the other students half the day, and the other half, he spent at a job, working to make money, which he gradually sent in little envelopes to people he had robbed. He didn't just send the money though. He also sent a note, that I'm told, went something like this:

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Some years ago, I stole a TV from your apartment. I am writing to say, I'm sorry. And to let you know that I don't steal anymore. I am studying in a yeshiva and trying, little by little, to repay the people I stole from. I realize this money is not enough to restore your TV, but maybe it can help a little, to restore your faith in humanity.

Judaism believes in second chances. Whatever our regrets - in our decisions, in our relationships - it's never too late to apologize and to change. I hear people say, "But it is too late. I wasn't around for my kids when they were young, and now they're all grown." Well, what if you set aside time for them now, commit to a weekly phone call, and just listen for 10 minutes, without interruption or judgment. Or maybe you have a neighbor with young kids. And you decide to make dinner for them occasionally, so that they can be more present with their kids.

There are lots of ways to do t'shuva. The starting point is owning the deeds that you regret, and knowing you can reboot.

God forgives. People forgive. You can forgive yourself, and start anew. T'shuva is the first tool in your Jewish operating system.

The second tool is Tefillah, prayer. I've spoken many times about the meaning I find in daily prayer, the power of a gratitude practice to flip the switch in our minds from "I have to" to "I get to." Tonight though, I want to talk about a different kind of prayer, that I'll call "turning to God." I want to share with you a personal story from my life.

One morning in August of 2008, I got a call that my dad was in heart failure. He was going into emergency surgery, and they didn't know if he would survive. I flew to Chicago, rushed to the hospital, and found my dad, on a ventilator in intensive care. The doctor said it was a miracle that he was

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alive. Still, we didn't know if he would survive the night, and get well enough to then have the big surgery he would need.

My mom and my brothers and I took turns sitting at the bedside and comforting one another in the waiting room. Then around midnight, my brothers went home. Around 2am, my mom, who had not slept the night before, agreed to go to the waiting room and try to sleep. I remained, alone at my father's side, too scared to leave. Scared that this would be the last time I saw my dad alive. Scared that if I left, he might die, alone. So I sat.

Around 3am, I took out my siddur, and wondered where I might look for

comfort. I landed on the Bedtime Shema - the Shema, V'ahavta, and other prayers, asking to lie down in peace and wake up again in peace. The words resonated. But I still couldn't leave. Then I came to the last bedtime prayer: Adon Olam. *B'yado afkid ruchy, b'eit ishan, v'a'ira. V'im ruchy, gevi'ati, Adonai li v'lo ira.* "Into God's hand, I entrust my spirit, when I sleep and when I wake. And with my spirit, my body too. God is with me. I shall not fear."

The prayer talks about God, but I said it to God. I'm putting this spirit in Your care, God. I can't watch him forever. I'm giving my dad to You.

And with that, I felt I was no longer alone. My dad was not alone. I could leave the room to sleep for a few hours. I was leaving my dad with God.

I'm happy to report, 11 years later, my dad is alive and well, still working and still cheering for the Cubs. Our family talks often about those days in the hospital. But, until writing this sermon, I never shared this experience with them. Jews don't usually talk about feeling powerless and reaching out to God. But I wish we did.

Because we all have moments in our lives when we feel powerless. It's not only when we're confronting death. Maybe it's when our body can't do

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what we want it to do. Maybe it's when we realize we can't fix our child's problems, or our parents' problems, or the world's problems.

We can let God into these moments too. We can literally stop and say, "God, I need You. I don't know how to do this. Help me...."

Will God come and solve your problem? I don't think so. But I believe

that your act of calling out to God will move you, a little bit, from that place where you were stuck. It will help you reboot.

This is tefilah. Tool #2 of our Jewish operating system. Tefilah, Jewish prayer, is not just about gratitude or reciting Hebrew words. It's about opening ourselves to the possibility that we are not alone.

Sometime over this Yom Kippur, give yourself a moment to put aside the prayer book, to put aside your doubts, and to turn to God. Laugh, cry, yell, grieve, share those places where you feel stuck, and ask for help. You are not alone.

Finally, a 3rd tool in our (Jewish) operating system: Tzedaka, Giving. We often think of tzedaka as charity, choosing where and what to give to others. But in Judaism, tzedaka isn't optional. It's a necessity - both for the society and for the soul. The rabbis insist, "Everyone is obligated to give tzedaka. Even one who is supported by tzedaka is required to give from what he's been given." The Shulchan Aruch continues, "Two people who are poor... can exchange tzedaka with each other." Why? Because both the act of giving and the act of receiving .. change the soul.

Over the last year, our community has been preparing to enter a brave new world of both giving and receiving, as we've begun our own **chevra kaddisha**. A chevra kaddisha, often called "Jewish burial society," is the 2000-year-old Jewish tradition of volunteers caring for the dead of their own

community. Judaism insists that our bodies are holy and must be treated with honor, even after we have died. Judaism also asserts that we have a

soul that is beginning a new journey when the body expires. Traditionally the community doesn't leave a person alone between death and burial. Instead, they perform the mitzvah of shmira, "guarding" or just sitting in the proximity of the deceased. And they perform the mitzvah of tahara, ritually washing and purifying the body, to prepare it for its final destination.

Until now, these rituals have been done for us, by paid employees in San Francisco. But our Jewish funeral home, Sinai Memorial Chapel wants that to change. They have just completed construction of a tahara room in their Redwood City office. And 40 members of Kol Emeth, Beth Jacob, and Peninsula Sinai have just completed a training course to perform taharat. Our whole community will now be able to take part in the mitzvah of shmira. You'll hear more about that soon. And, our whole community will be able to receive these acts of kindness, when the time comes.

I want to share a brief story from the tahara class. Our group studied the prayers and practices that accompany the ritual washing. And then, we did a demo. Three people laid down on tables to "play" the deceased, and the rest of learned, men with men, women with women, how to gently wash each part of their body, how to turn them and protect their modesty, how to pour the water in a special way, and finally declare, "Tahor hu," he is pure. "Tehorah hee," she is pure. She is ready to begin her journey.

When the class was over, one of the women who had played the deceased broke down crying. "I'm overwhelmed by the kindness of it all." she said. "If this is the kindness I'm going to receive when I'm dead, I want to be more kind now, while I'm living."

Receiving kindness changes us. So does giving it.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the needs in our world, to feel paralyzed by the amount of suffering. (That's why) I continue to be inspired by organizations like IsraAid, who look at a hurricane, an ebola epidemic, the global refugee crisis, and find something to do to help - sending doctors, setting up a daycare, distributing water purification kits.

As I look back on my year gone by, one of the moments I feel best about was doing a very small act of kindness in an overwhelming situation. Our vacation to Chicago this summer happened to coincide with a very hard time for one of my brothers. A divorce, financial struggles, 3 weeks to find a new place to live, and then he got a fever that just wouldn't go away. I offered to drive the hour from my parents' house to his, and maybe help him start looking at apartments. He agreed, and we managed to go see two disappointing apartments. But you know what I feel good about? Folding his laundry. We sat on his bed, laughed at a TV show together, and I folded my brother's laundry. (It was a lot of laundry.)

Funny thing is, I remember now, the TV show was a makeover show - professionals advising a nebischy guy on how to improve his look, improve his home, and reboot his life. Meanwhile, I was rebooting by a simple act of kindness. I think my brother was too.

Tzedaka, giving, kindness. It's at the core of our Jewish operating system. And it too helps us reboot.

So, here we are. It's Yom Kippur. We've been running so many programs on this one device of ours. Some programs are running

smoothly, and some of them are stuck.

About an hour ago, we shut the whole system down. You might have thought we'd turn it all back on tomorrow night, at break fast.

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But, the time to press the start button is NOW. The time to start rebooting our operating system is now.

Where in your life do you need t'shuva? - to say I'm sorry and try again.

Where in your life do you need tefilah? - to call out and realize you are not alone.

Where in your life do you need tzedaka? - to simply say "I can help."

The time has come to push "start." We'll pass out the cards, and let the rebooting begin.

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