



Kol Nidre – 5778 Three Inventions

by Rabbi Howard Lifshitz

One of the most stirring liturgical moments of the High Holidays comes during the musaf service as we stand while the shaliach tzibbur chants Unetaneh Tokef. We know the melody, we know the words, and whether we take those words literally or not, we cannot help considering what the year ahead holds for us and for those we love. The language is dark — as some translations put it, “*We shall ascribe holiness to this day for it is awesome and terrible*” — yet the end of the prayer brings hope, a better perspective and instruction for how to live during the coming year, as it, and we, proclaim: u-teshu-vah, u-tefilah, u-tzedakah, ma-avirin et ro-a ha-geze-rah — “*repentance, prayer and righteousness temper the severe decree.*” What we have done in the past may merit severe judgement, but by pursuing these three paths we can avert the stern decree, by undertaking these three strategies we can reshape our lives and find the ability to cope with, and overcome, whatever lies before us.

These three words — teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah — are ancient, so hallowed by tradition, that we sometimes don’t actually think about what they mean. So tonight I’d like to try something different to re-frame our thinking about these three concepts, so as to refresh the way we might follow these three different paths. Let’s consider three inventions, all created by Jews, and in them perhaps find fresh metaphors or images that will inspire us during these Days of Awe.

First, consider what Wayne Fromm, a Canadian Jew, patented in 2005 — the simple and useful selfie-stick. Suddenly it became easier for us to take pictures of ourselves, to capture our own image and view ourselves closely — as if we were turning a spotlight on ourselves or seeing ourselves through a magnifying glass. We can then inspect the image to see how we actually look. Most likely, if you are like me, we inevitably find something wrong with our appearance, wishing that we could change something about ourselves.

This is exactly what Teshuvah demands of us. Teshuvah means turning and *returning*. Often we speak of turning to God, but one of the lessons of Yom Kippur is that in order to turn to the Divine One, we have to start by turning inward; we have to look at whom we have become and what we have done over the past year. Through such introspection, through such an internal performance review, it is possible to recognize what we need to change, what aspects of our character need readjusting, Seeing ourselves as we really are, aware of flaws and shortcomings, we then can acknowledge that there is work to do on our behavior, our souls, and our spirits.

Another thing we know about the selfie-stick is that is adjustable. When kept short, the only subject captured is the photographer, but when extended, the camera captures the image of

those nearby, and even what is in the background. Then when the picture is viewed, we see and remember people who are special to us and recall the beauty, adventure and affection that have been part of our lives.

So it is with Teshuvah. We must start by turning inward, but we also have to extend our view just as we do with the selfie-stick. By working on ourselves, our eyes are opened to the world around us, the people who are beside us, those who need our love, our concern and our help and we become more aware that the flawed world in which we live needs our attention. Repentance reminds us that there is repair work to be undertaken on ourselves and in our communities, and that we are the ones to take the corrective efforts to fashion a community that is healing and to find our way to a sustaining relationship with God.

That brings me to the work of Warren Teitelman, a Jewish-American computer scientist, who realized that sometimes individuals entered inaccurate commands when compiling computer coding in their programs. He also knew that everyone makes typing errors. In 1972 he invented DWIM—which stands for *Do What I Meant* to write (not necessarily what I have typed). From that evolved the autocorrect feature on our wordprocessors and smart phones. That is a remarkable, efficient tool—if you don't spell something correctly or you mistakenly hit a wrong key, autocorrect will fix it. Without too much thought, we assume that autocorrect will remove our errors. But as we all know, it sometimes does not get it right and the result is that the text becomes humorous, insulting, or disturbing. Students who think spell-check, a kind of autocorrect, can absolve them from proofreading, learn, as all of us do, that no matter how sophisticated the program is, human intervention—human correction—remains a necessity.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could rely on autocorrect to do the hard work of fixing up our behavior and character? Wouldn't it be great if we did not have to think about our mistakes, misbehavior and missed opportunities to do what is good? But God, in Divine wisdom, gave us something far more powerful than autocorrect—we have been given the ability to Self-Correct.

And Tefillah, prayer, can be a guide, a tool, that direct us in the process of self-correction. Praying focuses our attention on where we have fallen short; it also can elevate us as it challenges us to correct ourselves so we can fulfill more of our potential as beings who can be just a little lower than the angels.

Tefillah is praying with intention and mindfulness. As we ponder the words we recite, they should lead us to a self-intervention. We must not be do it on autopilot, just mumbling words one after another or turning pages without thinking, hoping that God will correct them, that He will figure out what we meant to articulate. Yes, I know the story of the shepherd boy who comes to shul and simply recites the Hebrew alphabet and is told that God will combine the letters and hear his prayer. But the difference is that there the boy was wholehearted, humble, and sincere in his desire to reach beyond the mundane. Often, sadly, that is not the way we pray.

For prayer to be meaningful it has to touch us, for we are the object as well as the subject of our petitions and praise. While our words are addressed to the Divine, we are the ones that must be changed by them. Tefillot, our prayers, have to be offered with self-reflection, with

sincerity, and with humility. Then they have the power to pierce the shell that hardens our heart; that makes it difficult to self-correct our lives. That does not happen automatically. Prayer needs our intentional effort, our serious commitment, our resolve to respond to what we recite by changing course so that we can follow a better path. Just as our fingers sometime hit the wrong computer keys, so do we sometimes say or do the wrong thing. But heartfelt prayer can alert us to where we have missed the target and encourage us to reorient the way we live.

Paying attention to the words in the prayer book, we become aware of the values, the ideals, that they proclaim. The confessionals that we recite steer us away from certain actions and at the same time make us conscious of the right and just way to live. Throughout the mahzor and other prayer books, our prayers teach us the principles which can help us to make wise choices, and provide the standards by which we know how to self-correct our inner and outward being. Read the English, read the Hebrew, follow the commentaries, and certainly take time to offer deeply personal tefillah. Such mindful praying, such true tefillah, increases our resolve to return and correct our ways.

Now finally to the third and surely the simplest of inventions, something we take for granted and seldom notice. In 1858, a Jewish stationer in Philadelphia, Hyman Lippman, recognized that by attaching an eraser to the end of a pencil, work could be done more easily and errors could be removed more quickly than before. Joining the two elements together, he created the integrated pencil-eraser, a boon to all who write. Having the erasing medium right there — always ready — assures us that when we make a mistake, there is also a tool with which to make a correction, then start again and do better. That little piece of rubber acknowledges that while mistakes are inevitable, we nonetheless can surely overcome those flaws.

Tzedakah is like that eraser. Social justice and charity expand our lives and give us causes that refresh and redirect our actions. Just as Tefillah, prayer, animates us to correct ourselves by tending to our own shortcomings, Tzedakah now calls us to attend to the needs of others, to discover that by accepting our responsibility to repair the world, we are able to repair ourselves. When we participate in serving the less fortunate, when we fund those institutions that bring hope, faith and stability to our communities, and when the Torah's injunction "to love your neighbor as yourself" actually shapes our daily behavior, then the heavy burdens of past failings become lighter, our sins become more faint, and as the Bible says, "we are cleansed and become as white as snow (Isaiah 1:18)."

Do you remember what happens after you have done some erasing? There are always some particles on top of the paper. So after doing the work of erasing, we take a deep breath, blow those fragments of the eraser away, and then make the necessary corrections and continue our work.

This is exactly Yom Kippur's profound lesson. Empowered by teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah and trusting in God's forgiveness, we understand that we do not have to wallow in guilt and recrimination. We acknowledge that we have the capacity to self-correct and thus are not condemned by our past. We perceive that work remains to be done to improve ourselves and the world; and that we can and will be the ones to do it. Because Teshuvah can lead us to

repentance; because Tefillah, prayer, can change us; and because we can choose to accept the responsibility of Tzedekah, of pursuing justice and righteousness — we have more than enough reason to believe that, just as the eraser opens the way to correction, so will the commitments we now undertake ameliorate the stern decree and open the way to change and growth. Thus, with a clean slate, and with a fresh start before us, let us believe whole-heartedly that this will, indeed, be a year blessed with growth, confidence, hope, and joy.

Amen