WHAT'S THE PASSWORD
Kol Nidrei 5775 – Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Available on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHV-LEaCLX4&feature=youtu.be

Your password has expired.

These four words strike terror in the hearts of every computer user.

If you're like me you have an app to help you remember your passwords. And if you are like my parents, you have forgotten the password to unlock that app. Forget calling India for tech support, most of us call our children.

Yes, even our passwords have passwords, and we often (myself included) can't remember any of them.

The instructions that invariably follow, 'Your password has expired' are even more terrifying:

Click 'Change password' to change your password.

Then, when we click to that screen, we are greeted with a logic problem that would confound Einstein.

Your new password must use at least one UPPERCASE character, at least one lowercase alphabetic character, at least one symbol and at least one number. Oh, and the whole thing can't be less than eight characters. And you can't use any of the same passwords you've used in the last three months.

Sound familiar?

It was just such a message that greeted Mauricio Estrella one Monday morning when he sat down at his workstation in his corporate office. Only it wasn't just any Monday morning. This was the Monday after the weekend that Mauricio's divorce papers had become finalized. After 6 months of battling in lawyers offices and two years of battling in his living room, he was officially divorced and **unofficially** still angry about it.

So when he sat down to his computer to grind out another day, the monthly computer generated greeting, '*Its been 30 days, your password has expired, time to change it*' nearly sent him over the edge he had been teetering on for some time.

I say nearly because Mauricio -- who by the way is a real person and this is a true story – Mauricio did something brilliant in that moment, something that changed his life.

Realizing that he would have to type this new password into his computer 7-10 times a day, every day for 30 days he saw an opportunity to let his new password not only unlock his work station but also unlock the burdens of his broken heart. His new password:

4 – Give - @ - Her

During the rest of week, he had to type this password several times a day. Each time his computer would lock he had to type:

4 – Give - @ - Her

Each time his screensaver with the photo of him and his children would appear, he had to type:

4 – Give - @ - Her

Each time he would come back from eating lunch alone, he would type:

4 – Give - @ - Her

In his mind he wasn't typing a password, in his mind he was reminding himself to "Forgive her". Mauricio was training himself, using an intentional habit of repetition to create a desired positive outcome. Mauricio was praying through his password.

That simple action changed the way he related to his ex-wife. That constant reminder that he should forgive her, led him to accept the way things happened at the end of his marriage, and embrace a new way of dealing with the depression and anger that hung over him like a dark cloud. The password wasn't the answer but it was the key. Using the power of habit he was able unlock the internal barriers he had erected and open up a new perspective.

In the days that followed, his mood improved drastically, he looked forward to coming to work, and he looked forward to typing his password. It was a small positive step he could take a few times a day, every day; toward becoming the person he wanted to be, the person he needed to be.

By the end of the second week, he noticed that this password became less powerful, and it started to lose its effect. Habits and routines can do that, they can become rote, we forget why we initiated them and so we give up or we mindlessly continue to do them but absent any of the benefit we intended to derive from them in the first place.

The prophet Isaiah cautioned us about just that kind of rote, mindless action with the familiar fast we begin yet again this Kol Nidrei.

In the Yom Kippur Haftarah portion, we read the often-quoted line from Isaiah:

"Is this the fast I have chosen? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed… NO, the fast I desire is to unlock the shackles of injustice, to bring an end to lawlessness, to let the oppressed go free. To share your bread with the hungry, to take the poor into your homes, to clothe the naked and not to ignore your fellow when in need". [1]

Isaiah equates fasting with doing. He indicts us for mindless, rote, lack of intention in our behavior. Our fasting becomes meaningless because it is meaningless to us. The fast our tradition seeks, that Isaiah cries out for is not merely the ache of hunger in our bellies, but to alleviate hunger in the bellies of others. Fasting with a purpose, a purpose that leads to action.

Mauricio stopped himself before his password became rote; before it lost the meaning he had carefully given it. With mindfulness and self-awareness he started to quietly say the password to himself as he typed it, not letting the weight of the words get lost in the repetition of the familiar keystrokes. The healing effect of it came back almost immediately.

In time the simple yet powerful habit of using a password as a prayer, unlocked his power of forgiveness. It unlocked his heart and he forgave her.

When he shared this insight with others, he would describe it as, "How a password changed my life."

Charles Duhigg, in his best selling book "The Power of Habit", explains that **much** of our behavior is guided by habits.

Researchers at Duke University calculated that more than 40 percent of the actions we take are governed by habit, not actual decisions. These can range from what products we buy in the grocery store to when we go to sleep. Habits are ingrained so deeply in the brain that a patient with brain damage sitting in his living room can't tell you where the kitchen is, but if he is hungry, he can get a jar of peanut butter out of the pantry.

Those same researchers have come to understand that a three-step process forms habits, both good and bad:

1. Cue
2. Routine
3. Reward

The **CUE** is the thing that triggers the habit. For some of us it's the smell of a favorite food, or ding of our email on our cellphone that causes us to enter routine behavior and then get the relative satisfaction of the reward. Duhigg explains, we can't change the **CUE**, the trigger, but we can redirect it toward good rather than bad habits.

Our sages teach the same, "*Hergel naaseh tevah*"[2]—what we become accustomed to doing becomes our second nature.
This is the power of habit – it becomes out nature. Or put another way – we are all in large part a collection of our various habits.

One reason Judaism has survived for over 3,300 years is that Jewish practice involves doing the same things every day, every week, every month and every year at the same times and in the same ways. Our religion is habit forming.

As Ahad Ha'Am famously put it, "As much as the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people." What he meant goes well beyond Jewish survivalism. He meant that the regulation of time through the customs of the Sabbath gave Jews the chance to regroup in communities at the end of every week. This tradition - and what is tradition but habit passed from one generation to the next - has sustained Jewish identity for generations.

Habits are **good**, unless of course they're **bad**.

We all know the potential bad habits have to take root and undermine us at every turn. But Mauricio's example and these High Holy Days point out the tremendous power for **good** that habits can have to help us reshape and reorder our lives.

The first step in creating a positive habit out of a bad habit is mindfulness or awareness of the **CUE**; the thing that triggers the regrettable behavior.

For Mauricio it was every time he thought of his wife; saw a picture, experienced something in solitude that he used to do with her. He couldn't erase his memory of her so he reasoned the only way to live with it; was to deal with it. Dealing with our emotions begins with being honest with ourselves.

In the world of 12-step programs that deal with addictions and compulsions this is called the first step. Admitting to ourselves that we are powerless over that unwanted behavior and that our lives had become unmanageable.

The injunctive of these High Holy Days is no different, the first step of *T'shuvah* or repair and return to our life and character as we want it to be is *Hesbone HaNefesh* - a thorough and complete accounting of our souls.

Once we identify the **CUE**, the trigger, the thing that sets us off, then what do we do?

Step two to creating a positive habit with the power to transform us is to establish a **ROUTINE**, manufacture a good habit from the roots of a bad one.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist David Brooks observes that, "in the 19th century, there was a hydraulic model of how to be a good person. The thinking then was that

there were all these torrents of passion flowing through us. Our job, as captain of our soul, was to erect dams to keep these passions in check. Our job was to just say no to laziness, lust, greed, drug use and the other sins. Willpower and resolve could ward off any bad habits."[3]

We usually **can't** change our behavior by simply resolving to do something. If that were true, New Year's resolutions for the secular year and the Jewish year would actually work.

Knowing what to do **is not the same** as being able to do it.

Jewish tradition never subscribed to this hydraulic model. In Judaism change does not come from willpower it comes from brainpower, from wisdom, from study that leads to new insights. Change comes when we use our *sechel*, our good sense.

Our mind is not a dam that can block the torrent of self-indulgence. It's more like a muscle, albeit one which tires easily. We strengthen the muscle the same way we strengthen our physical body in the gym, through repetition.[4]

Our tradition teaches that a thing done three times is ***chazakah,*** something the Talmud says has the strength of tangible property, something done with the strength of **habit** and Law.

Like in the Israeli Film *Ushpizin* where a Jewish man reluctantly forgives another for a transgression; whereupon the transgressor says NO NO! You must say it THREE TIMES! So, the guy says, "Okay, Okay…..I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you!" As they say, 'the third time's the charm'. It's a very Jewish concept. Its **chazakah- the power of habit.**

The power of habit is transformative; we can use it to replace bad habits with good habits.

For example, if you want to start working out, leave your running shorts on the floor at night, that'll be a cue to go run in the morning. Don't try to ignore your afternoon snack craving. Every time you feel the cue for a snack, insert another routine. Take a walk. If you want to forgive someone you once cared about – make that statement your computer password. Unlock the powerful potential of habit for good.

If the 19th-century model implied a moralistic captain steering the ship of the soul, the new character model implies a crafty Machiavellian, deftly manipulating the neural networks inside to create a **routine** powerful enough to bend our own stubborn will.

Habits are formed through CUE, ROUTINE and the third step REWARD.

Reward solidifies the behavior and creates the loop that compels us to do it all over again. In bad habits the reward is fleeting and often doubled edged. That afternoon

snack from the vending machine that was triggered by loneliness tastes good for a moment but weighs us down with guilt (and calories).

In good habits the reward is liberating, the weight we have lost, the freedom from internal demons or external pressures. But Judaism teaches that the true reward is greater than that, the reward is in the trying even if the behavior is not fully corrected.

On Yom Kippur we read that God sits in judgment of us and our actions for the year. The image we have is of scales; the relative weight of our actions for good or for bad hanging in the balance.

With such a model we sit here in shul and wonder did our good deeds out weigh our failings this past year?

But that is **not** the question our tradition asks us to contemplate on Yom Kippur. Rather the question before us and God during these days of reflection is how far we have come from where we were? God, a judge and arbiter weighs our sins and our mitzvahs relative to us.

In Judaism the harder a habit is to break and redirect toward the positive the more credit God gives to us for trying, even if we fall and fail along the way.[5] The **reward** is in the growth that comes from trying. In Judaism, God grades on a curve. Thank God!

Whether that password changed Mauricio's attitude toward his ex-wife or not is only part of the point. The larger message and the thing our tradition judges most of all is that he tried.

Through *Heshbone HaNefesh* a thorough and mindful examining of his soul he identified the **CUE** that was undermining him.

With *sechel* a little wisdom, he created a positive **ROUTINE**, that through its repetition strengthened his mind to better control his actions.

The **REWARD** regardless of the ultimate outcome was in having moved some distance along the path toward a better, more intentional version of himself. He was taking steps that were habit forming and kept him walking in a positive direction. Habit is a self-generating loop, the **REWARD** is in doing, we just have to be wise enough to leverage the power of habit for good.

Shortly after Mauricio had accepted the reality of his divorce and forgiven her, his computer promoted him yet again to change his password. This time he typed:

Quit@smoking4ever

And he did, as he tells it, nearly over night.

Over the next year he tackled a new challenge every month as his computer promoted him to change his password. He saw it as a prompt to change his life.

The last three passwords he created:

Askher4@date - it worked.
He fell in love again.

Save4@ring

PopThe@question - He did and she said YES!

Our Rabbis teach that if you are going in one direction your whole life and you want to change course all you have to do is stop, turn around and take a step in the other direction. Start walking the walk, and the rest will follow.

The password to unlock the door to change is no secret, it's inside each of us, we just need the courage and maybe a little bit of *sechel* to type it in.

It's not like we're giving up a lot when we change our password anyway. A CBS study on the most commonly used passwords says we are most likely to be abandoning such life affirming choices as: #1- 12345678, #2- password, or #3- the ever inspirational QWERTY, which is what you get when you run your finger across the keyboard from left to right. Surely we can do better than THAT! We have more *sechel* than THAT!

Now is the time before the gates begin to close, change your password, change the password to the operating system of your life and press ENTER. Unleash the power of habit for good. What have you got to lose? The **REWARD** is in trying.

Oh, and don't even think about using @Babetterrabbi. That one is already taken.

---

[1] Isaiah 58:5-7
[2] Rambam, Shemona Perakim, ch. 4
[3] David Brooks, The Machiavellian Temptation – New York Times, March 1, 2012
[4] David Brooks, The Machiavellian Temptation – New York Times, March 1, 2012
[5] *Michtav M'Eliyahu, 1st Chelek, pp. 115-6*