

Rosh Hashanah 5777, Day 2
October 4, 2016

I got Miriam a fitbit for her birthday, per her request. As most of you probably know, a fitbit is a device that tracks the number of steps you take in a day. It can also track the amount of sleep you get. It is such a cool little device -- either worn like a wristwatch or clipped to one's belt -- that my kids have been borrowing it. Miriam showed me the iPhone comparison of the results. It showed one particular spike in her day, probably when she was deliberately taking a walk. But Ari and Shuli showed about 6 spikes in their day. In any case, the basic metric is supposed to be one should take 10,000 steps in a day. I venture to guess that many of us do not often get to that level, which it turns out is not that easy to get to.

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg describes the reaction of a friend to the fitbit, once he explains what it does:

“C’mon Rabbi, sounds like shtick to me. Do you really need that? What does it do for you? You already know you should be active each day and that you need to get enough sleep, so just do what

you are supposed to, why do you need to wear something?”

In response, Rabbi Goldberg cites the management guru Peter Drucker, “What gets measured, gets managed.”

“The value of wearing a Fitbit,” I told my friend, “is that it holds me accountable to achieve my commitment and forces me to confront the reality of falling short, rather than at the end of each day bluffing or fooling myself about what had in fact transpired that day.”

This made me think of this new device in a new light: the fitbit is about being honest with yourself! This brings to mind the statement of Rabbi Bunem of Peshischa, who suggests the Torah commands us, “Do not deceive anybody. Not even yourself!” The first key to teshuvah, then, is not to deceive yourself. This is why Maimonides’ first step is to name your sin. I believe this is also why the Al Chet on Yom Kippur is set up the way it is, 44 specific things we may be guilty of. When my

family does Tashlikh and we throw our bread in the water, we try to say specific resolutions to do differently: "I will yell less at bedtime...."

This can be one of the hardest steps in the process. We deceive ourselves in any number of ways so we can continue to believe we are just as kind, thoughtful, and talented as we think we are. I once knew a guy in another community who thought he was a terrific cantor. He seemed so deeply invested in this assumption that no one had the heart or the courage to tell him his singing annoyed people. Almost all of us have been graded in school and evaluated at work, and there are times when the most painful comments are also the most helpful.

Furthermore, just like in fitness, if you are interested in changing, make specific goals and measure and track your success. If you want to manage your anger, you must figure out: When am I most likely to get angry? What measurement will I use to determine success? Perhaps, for example, if you are prone to road rage, your first goal can be to never get out of your car in anger and confront somebody. If you are unhealthily workaholic, don't just say, "I will spend more time with my

family.” Say, “My spouse and I will go on a date every month.” “I will ask each of my children three times a week what they are doing in school.” If you want to engage in more Torah study, your goal might be to look at one insight on the Parashah every week. It is worth noting that with a fitbit, there is a clear measurement for how many steps you take in a day, how many hours you sleep. Teshuvah can be harder to measure. One way you can is to keep a journal, perhaps noting each time you had trouble managing your anger and why. With a fitbit you can conference with a friend comparing yourselves. Likewise, in teshuvah it is helpful to have a friend who can give you honest thoughts on whether you are achieving your goals. It is also essential to establish achievable goals for yourself, and to congratulate yourself when you succeed, not only criticize yourself when you fail.

Another thing with the fitbit. It resets every day. That is also the idea behind teshuvah at this season of the year. As much as possible, we leave the past behind and start over anew. Teshuvah is primarily forward-looking. The main reason we review our transgressions is so

that we can commit to not re-committing them. When we do teshuvah, the clock is set anew. One of the ways one can commit the sin of *ona'at devarim*, hurtful speech, is by reminding a *ba'al teshuvah* of sins he or she formerly committed. Even the nature of our past sins changes in hindsight. The ancient sage “Resh Lakish said: Great is repentance, for because of it deliberate sins are accounted as mere errors.” And the talmud cites another opinion that he said, “Great is repentance, for because of it deliberate sins are accounted as merits.” If we change the future, we can change our past.

My rabbi, Sidney Greenberg, used to say that the phrase we recite at the Musaf Shofar blowing, *hayom harat olam*, “Today is the birthday of the world!” can also be understood as “Today is pregnant with eternity.” If we program our spiritual fitbits correctly, the possibilities for the coming year are infinite. In 5777, may we take the measure of ourselves properly in order to become better people. May we avoid deceiving ourselves as to our failings, but also be confident in our ability to make a new start. As we read today in our Haftarah, *hashiveni*

v'ashuvah, “Help me return to You, God, and I will return.”