



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Shabbat Shuva

Does Autocorrect Solve Problems or Create Them?

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DOES AUTOCORRECT SOLVE PROBLEMS OR CREATE THEM?

ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1996, Ron Fein, a program manager at Microsoft Word, composed a humorous Talmudic spoof on web programming.

He shared it with his boss, Dean Hachamovitch, also of the tribe. You probably never heard of Dean Hachamovitch, but, if you have ever texted, you have certainly used an invention he helped create.

Autocorrect.

What can autocorrect teach us about correcting our mistakes and petrifying...perfecting our typos?

When we make a mistake is it better to push it down and hide it or try to lift it up and elevate it?

There is a Talmudic debate over the matter. Based on our Haftorah of Shabbat Shuva, one great sage says G-d will hide our wrongs, while another great sage opines that G-d will lift our transgressions.

Which one is it?

And when we make a mistake that is not autocorrected, is it best for us to hide it so that it does not distract us or elevate it so that it becomes transformed good?

1. Shabbat Shuva

This Shabbat has a special name: Shabbat Shuva. The reason for this is because it is the Shabbat in these Ten Days of Teshuvah between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Essentially, on this Shabbat we have special strength to repair mistakes and create a better future.

I would like to share with you today a fascinating lesson we can all learn about this Shabbat Shuva from an unlikely place: One of today's modern tools, which we all use every time we text or write anything on our devices. That tool is called autocorrect – it automatically corrects the words you are typing.

The history of this invention is quite intriguing, and quite... Jewish.

2. The Fasinatng... Fascinating History of Autocorrect (Story)

Many of the programmers working at Microsoft in its 90s heyday were geeky, brainy Jewish geniuses, who at times found nerdy fun in bridging their Jewish backgrounds and programming skills.

In the summer of 1996, one such programmer named Ron Fein, who worked as a program manager at Microsoft Word, received a humorous email from a coworker Noah Edelstein with a link to the website www.bubbe.com and asking humorously if it was a mitzvah to design a web site for one's bubbe.

In that humorous vein, Ron Fein composed a Talmudic spoof to answer that question. Here is an excerpt:

Rabbi Tarfon of Bet She'an said of Rabbi Shlomo ben Yechezkel of Tiverya: It is said that in those days Rabbi Shlomo ben Yechezkel of Tiverya designed a web site for the mother of his father, Sarah the daughter of Pinchas, who begat Yechezkel, who begat Rabbi Shlomo ben Yechezkel of Tiverya. Thus Rabbi Shlomo ben Yechezkel of Tiverya performed the mitzvah of web site design.

...One time a poor man came into the home of Rabbi Shmaryahu of Hevron and asked for two megabytes of disk space on the web site of Rabbi Shmaryahu of Hevron. Rabbi Shmaryahu of Hevron refused the man, but instead gave him a personal web server for his own use. At this point Rabbi Yehudah ben Yerachmiel asked Rabbi Shmaryahu of Hevron: Why did you refuse this man's request, but instead give him a personal web server for his own use? Rabbi Shmaryahu of Hevron replied: It [the Mishnah] teaches: "When a poor man comes into your home and asks for disk space on your web site, first ascertain whether he is going to use it for his own purpose or for the purpose of idol worship. If he is going to use it for his own purpose, grant him the space he asks, unless it exceeds twenty ephraot [one ephrah = 213 kilobytes], in which case you may refer him to a local Internet service provider, for as it is written: It is not upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it. If he is going to use it for the purpose of idol worship, then do not give him the space, but instead rebuke him, that he might see the error of his ways and refrain from idol worship."¹

This, my fellow Jews, is how the Chosen Ones spend their idle time in the world's largest corporations.

But why am I sharing this with you today, on Shabbat Shuva?

After composing this contemporary high-tech Talmud, Ron Fein distributed it to his coworkers and fellow Tribe members, including his boss, a man named Dean Jacob Hachamovitch. Dean was born to Dr. Moshe and Shoshana Hachamovitch and, after graduating Harvard, joined Microsoft, ultimately ascending to the corporate vice president in charge of the Internet Explorer team and then the head of data science for the entire Microsoft.

¹ <http://www.exmsft.com/~ronfe/writings.htm>.

This whole preamble was to lead up to this: perhaps Dean Hachamovitch's most ubiquitously contribution is something we should all be very thankful for, even if it at times it frustrates us to no end. And it is something that could help teach us a very important lesson about Shabbat Shuva and what it means to return from and overcome mistakes.

That invention is, you guessed it – autocorrect!

A fascinating article in Wired magazine interviews Hachamovitch and tracks the evolution of autocorrect from its nascent days as a Microsoft Word tool to the infamy it possesses today over what and how we text.

One paragraph sums up the essence of autocorrect:

A handful of factors are taken into account to weight the variables: keyboard proximity, phonetic similarity, linguistic context. But it's essentially a big popularity contest. A Microsoft engineer showed me a slide where somebody was trying to search for the long-named Austrian action star who became governor of California. Schwarzenegger, he explained, "is about 10,000 times more popular in the world than its variants"—Shwaranegar or Scuzzynectar or what have you. Autocorrect has become an index of the most popular way to spell and order certain words.²

In other words: autocorrect basically replaces a misspelled word with the most popular one its closest proximity.

3. Autocorrect (Humorous)

Many are the words for a mistake: sin, iniquity, transgression, deficiency, misdeed, wrongdoing, offense, misbehave, go astray, typo, mistype.

Albert Einstein is quoted as saying that "anyone who never made a mistake never tried anything new.

One way to see the power of a mistake is by looking at something as simple – and funny – as spelling mistakes, or typos. In the era of text messages, the typo, and its nemesis, autocorrect, has been experienced by all.

Here are a few examples to demonstrate the point in a humorous way:

This mistake, from a husband texting his wife while on a business trip, could have had disastrous results for their marriage:

"Having such a wonderful time! Wish you were her!"

² <https://www.wired.com/2014/07/history-of-autocorrect/>.

He forgot to add an ‘e’ at the end of the last word!

In front of a fire station the parking sign mistakenly left off the final ‘d’:

“Illegally parked cars will be fine.”

4. Autocorrect Reflects G-d’s Creation

We just celebrated the creation of the world on Rosh Hashana. The Creator fashioned the world in such a brilliant way where almost all natural things can autocorrect themselves. Most mistakes, or ‘typos’ in life are immediately corrected without much work or effort.

Just witness how nature corrects itself to adjust to circumstances, even extreme circumstances. How a forest regenerates after a fire. How different creatures adapt to challenges. There is clearly a deep intelligence embedded into our universe that allows it to autocorrect itself when necessary.

The same is in our own bodies.

For example, look at how a simple cut on your skin heals itself. First, the body works to limit blood loss by reducing the amount of blood flowing to the wounded area. Proteins in blood, such as fibrin, work with the blood platelets already in place and plasma to form a protective covering called a scab. While your skin regenerates underneath the protective layer, the scab protects the wound from outside infection.

The wound is gradually healed as new granular skin tissue begins to generate. Starting at the edges of the wound, the new tissue forms and works its way toward the center until it has covered the entirety of the lesion. Once the wound underneath has sealed itself with another skin layer, the scab will slough off on its own.

All this – auto-correction, without you doing a thing!

Or take your digestive system: when you eat, your body automatically sifts through food, separating the nutrients from the surplus, effectively autocorrecting your input, and eliminating the waste. Fascinatingly, the same is true with all of our senses, hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and touching. We do not hear or see or smell or touch or taste every nuance of an object, rather our minds autocorrect and fill in the parts that our antennas do not literally grasp.³

Indeed, an autoimmune disease, is a body “auto” responding to something it shouldn’t be responding to, or “autocorrecting” in the wrong way like your phone often does.

The brain’s autocorrect function is a highly interesting topic in of itself, alas one beyond the scope of this humble Shabbat Shuva talk.

³ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/06/140627094551.htm>.

The point being that the vast majority of things in life correct themselves naturally, and do not require active intervention to return or correct to the desired result.

However, there is one glaring exception to this autocorrect rule: Our human moral choices.

When we make a mistake and hurt someone – intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously – we cannot rely on an auto-correction; we need to make an active and exerted effort and to atone and correct the wrong.

The same is true when we hurt our own self.

This is the time of year – during the ten days of Teshuvah/return, beginning on Rosh Hashanah and culminating with Yom Kippur – when we focus on those parts of life that do not autocorrect and require effort and diligence to overcome and transform the typos and mistakes of life.

On this Shabbat Shuva, the Shabbat of return, we are given additional power to correct our mistakes and typos and return ourselves to a well-spelled state.

When autocorrect doesn't work, what does? Shabbat Shuva – and the general Ten Days of Teshuvah. Shabbat Shuva is for when autocorrect doesn't work – or when autocorrect makes things worse.

5. The Haftorah of Return – When Autocorrect Doesn't Work

How to overcome mistakes? Is it better to try to forget them or to transform them? Should we bury our deficiencies or attempt to elevate them? Should we endeavor to hide them or raise them up?

The Haftorah for Shabbat Shuva addresses correcting mistakes that cannot be autocorrected. The Haftorah begins with verses from Hosea, and concludes with three verses from Micah Chapter 7:

Verse 18: Who is a G-d like You, Who lifts iniquity and passes over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving-kindness.

Verse 19: He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities, and You shall cast into the depths of the sea all their sins.

Verse 20: You shall give the truth of Jacob, the loving-kindness of Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from days of yore.⁴

⁴ Micha 7:18-20.

The Haftorah seems to suggest two different ways to overcome a mistake that cannot autocorrect itself. Verse 18 says that G-d will lift up and help us transcend our mistakes. But verse 19 states that G-d will hide our mistakes, instead of lifting them up.

So, which one is it – are mistakes meant to be hidden and concealed or lifted and transformed?

Using a practical example from everyday: When you may make a mistake, say forget that it's your spouse's birthday, or intentionally say something nasty about your co-worker, should you simply bury and conceal it or should you attempt to transcend and elevate the wrong into a right?

6. A Talmudic Debate

These two verses in Micha are the basis of a debate recorded in the Talmud⁵: How does it [forgiveness] work? Rabbi Eliezer says, *He pushes it down, as it states (in verse 19), He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities.* Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina says, *He lifts it up, as it states (in verse 18), Who lifts iniquity and passes over the transgression.*

Their debate seems unclear. What exactly does their argument consist of? Should a mistake be pushed down/away or lifted up?

Rashi explains: They are discussing the scales of judgment. When G-d forgives and ensures that our merits will outweigh our demerits, G-d can do it in one of two ways: either He could **push down** the side of the scales that contain the merits, thus making them heavier, or He can **lift up** the side of the scales that contain the demerits thus making them lighter. According to Rabbi Eliezer, forgiveness is G-d **pushing down** the merits, tipping the scales in our favor, and according to Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina divine forgiveness consists of tipping the scales in our favor by **lifting up** and lightening the demerits.

This still requires explanation: Is their debate simply about a technicality, which side of the scale G-d chooses to push down or lift? What difference does it make whether G-d gives more weight to our merits or gives less weight to our iniquities – either way the result is the same?

7. Hiding, Elevating and Transforming Mistakes

However, within this seeming technicality lies a highly sophisticated understanding of forgiveness and overcoming mistakes. And it is hinted to in the three verses from Micha we just read.

⁵ Rosh Hashanah 17a. Erchin 8b. Compare Rashi's differing interpretations.

Verse 18: Who lifts iniquity... Verse 19: He shall hide our iniquities... Verse 20: You shall give the truth of Jacob.

These three verses speak of three ways of correcting mistakes:

1. Verse 18 speaks of divine forgiveness as G-d bearing and lifting up our mistakes.
2. Verse 19 articulates divine forgiveness as pushing down and hiding our mistakes, subsuming them in the depths of the sea, embodied in the ritual of Tashlich, casting our sins into the sea.
3. Verse 20 speaks of truth. *Emes* is the Hebrew word for Truth. *Emes* consists of three letters: alef, mem and tof – the first, the middle and the last of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This indicates that truth is holistic – consistent through the beginning, middle and end. In our instance it refers to the fact that true forgiveness includes both the lifting up of mistakes and the concealment of them.⁶

“The truth of Jacob” – in the third and final verse 20 – is coming to tell us that the ultimate truth, the ultimate objective and aspiration is to transform every transgression and mistake into something positive and great; to turn the liability into an asset.

However, in this practical and tangible world in which we live, there are some mistakes that initially require hiding and ignoring, and some that call for lifting up and elevating.

Often times a mistake we make consumes us to the point that it does not allow us to get back on course and move forward. At these times, the immediate solution is to first “stop the bleeding” (so to speak), and push down and hide that mistake in order to move forward.

Think of someone who was injured, G-d forbid. Before solving the problem, the bleeding needs to be stopped and short term measures need to be taken to stabilize the situation.

However, “hiding” a mistake only allows you to move forward to grow, but it does not address the actual mistake. After you overcome the paralysis of the mistake by hiding it, the next step is to make a plan for lifting it up and transforming the mistake into a force for good.

8. Hiding Vs. Elevating Mistakes

Now we will understand the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina – is forgiveness characterized by pushing down and stressing the weight of the merits (while forgetting our demerits), or is it elevating and converting our demerits into merits?

⁶ For the mystical understanding of this, see Ohr HaTorah, Neviim Uktuvim, to Micah 7:19 (p. 492).

As a practical example: Say you got into a massive argument with a family member or a colleague. You feel that you've been wronged, the other party feels that they've been wronged and it's one big painful mess.

With emotions running high, there is initially no room for mediation to remedy or transform the situation. Everyone is too angry and hurt. The first step, says Rabbi Eliezer, is to push aside and "hide" the grievance for the time being. "He pushes it down, as it states, *He shall return and grant us compassion; He shall hide our iniquities*. The first step is to hide and conceal the argument and wrongdoing, so that the air can be cleared before attempting a reconciliation. Just forget it, bury it, cast it into the sea. Don't think about it, put it in the attic.

That's the first step. It creates space. It clears away the immediate toxic environment.

At times this may be enough to achieve healing and reconciliation.

But at times it may not be enough. In those instances we don't stop with hiding the issue. Concealing the issue in these cases is not enough and will sooner or later creep back up, perhaps even worse than before.

What to do? Says Rabbi Yosi bar Chanina: "lift it up, as it states, *Who lifts iniquity and passes over the transgression*." Now that space has been created between the arguing parties, you can begin the working on "lifting" up the dispute, finding ways, with an objective party, on reconciling and indeed, transforming your relationship to a state that is even better than it was before.

This is return. True return. True teshuvah.

9. Conclusion: Bookkeeping

There is a famous Yiddish remedy for a nudnik, an insufferable annoying nuisance and pest. If he is wealthy, ask him for a loan. If he is poor, give him one.

Which brings to mind an interesting Midrash, citing the above-discussed verses in Micha⁷:

See how the Holy One Blessed Be differs from a person of flesh and blood. When a person reviews his books and accounts, if he finds that people owe him money, he goes after them and shows them the books. If he finds that he owes people money, he hides the books. With the Holy One Blessed Be it is the exact opposite: If He finds that we owe Him, He hides it, as it says, He shall hide our iniquities, and if he finds that He owes us, He reveals it, as it says, The Lord has brought out our merits.

Most things in G-d's universe autocorrect themselves. On Shabbat Shuva we are reminded that even the bigger mistakes that take effort to correct are hidden by G-d to allow us to overcome them.

⁷ Exodus Rabbah 25:6.

Allow me to conclude with a blessing. May we emulate the Creator: when someone has wronged us, let us bury it and overcome it. If someone owes us, let us hide the books and allow them the grace and dignity to fulfill their responsibility on their own, and when we owe someone let us fulfill that obligation without delay.

This is true return, elevating out past mistakes and retuning to our true, pure selves.

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!

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