Computers, Holiness and the Power of Change: Thoughts on Parashat Shemini

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemini

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In 1980, our synagogue office became computerized. Each of our staff members was given a computer on which to do our work. My computer sat in my office in an unopened box for about a year. A member of the synagogue Board visited me one day and saw the box. He asked why I wasn't using the computer.

I answered: I don't need it. I have a secretary. I have an electric typewriter. Why should I get started with this newfangled contraption? He immediately asked to use my phone, and he called a friend who was a computer teacher. For the next two days, she came to my office and taught me how to use the computer. After those two days, I became "addicted" to the computer, and don't know how I could live without it.

This episode came to mind recently, when I had a discussion with a computer expert from Los Angeles who has many older clients who did not have computers during their childhoods. He told me that one of the biggest problems is getting these people to overcome their psychological resistance to entering the world of computers.

Why did I leave my computer box unopened for a year? Why do people resist learning new computer programs?

The problem does not stem from intellectual or physical inability. Once we learn to use computers, we do fine. The problem is different: it entails overcoming a psychological barrier. A new way of doing things tends to threaten the way we've always done things in the past; it threatens our comfort level, our feeling of being in control. We suddenly become dependent on technicians, who seem to speak in a language we can't fully understand. The world is changing rapidly, and we are

becoming dinosaurs. Stop the world, I want to get off!

But once we overcome these psychological barriers, we can enter the new age and learn the necessary skills, and actually find satisfaction and joy in our progress. The determining factor is: do we have the right mindset? Do we have the will to change? Do we have the inner strength to start from scratch, as though we're back in first grade?

This dilemma, in a different form, is raised in this week's Torah reading. God tells us: "sanctify yourselves and be holy; for I am holy." Rashi points out that "sanctify yourselves" means we need to develop the right attitude; "be holy" can be fulfilled only after we want to sanctify ourselves.

Just as some people have psychological barriers about computers and other technology, some have psychological barriers about religion. They prefer to leave the "box of religion" unopened, because it may challenge their comfort level. They are nervous about religious faith, about commitment to mitzvoth, about changing their lifestyles. Or, they may already be religiously observant, but they are uneasy about getting more deeply involved, more intensely learned; they don't know where this will lead. They don't want to upset the status quo.

The Torah is aware of these concerns; so it teaches us first to sanctify ourselves, to develop an open and receptive attitude, to reach a proper comfort level in our spiritual growth. Once we have made this internal shift in the way we approach life, we can then go to the next step: be holy. We can grow in our religious knowledge and commitment without being blocked by self-imposed psychological barriers.

People crave spirituality, but are afraid of spirituality. They don't know how to express it. Or they fear that it will lead them to change in new, untested directions. The Torah assures us: don't be afraid. We can overcome our resistances and our anxieties. We just need to start by sanctifying ourselves, by teaching ourselves to be receptive, by changing our attitudes. If we can overcome these internal psychological barriers, we can then move on in a more productive, more creative, and happier way.

People fail in life not because they don't have the power to change and to grow; but because they inwardly resist change and growth. People succeed in life because they have the strength to learn, to grow, to see life as an unfolding adventure which should be lived with courage and vitality.

Angel for Shabbat