

When you think about it, the wheel is truly revolutionary. (And yes, that was a bad attempt at humor. It's okay to laugh: at me or with me. The wheel is truly revolution-ary. Get it? Do I need to bring the bicycle back?)

It's true! When you picture a wheel in your mind, you're probably thinking about some type of movement. Whether you are thinking of our ancient forbearers using logs to move heavy stones some 15,000 years ago or thinking about your car tires and realizing you should probably replace them before winter, the idea of circular motion moving us forward was a leap of human imagination. From carts to chariots to bicycles to electric cars, the wheel allowed us to cover greater distances, harvest more crops, move heavier loads, and so much more with greater ease and efficiency. If you were to turn to the person beside you and ask them the best, most enduring invention in human history, they would likely say "the wheel." It's such a great invention that its even at the hub...that's the center of a wheel, it's okay to chuckle...it's such a great invention that it's also one of our most-used cliches: "Let's not reinvent the wheel."

"Reinventing the wheel is what has given human beings an edge," writes Roma Agrawal in her book *Nuts and Bolts: Seven Small Inventions That Changed The World In A Big Way*. Turn that basic wheel on its side, she says, and human beings are able to create pottery not only for beauty but for storage. Spin that wheel with human, animal, water, or wind power and you can transform whole grains into flour. Add teeth to the wheel and watch it spin as it powers the mechanical world as we know it. With a bit of careful reinvention, that very same wheel that helped us traverse distance can now help us save time, perform tasks, and create wonders unimaginable to our ancestors. The clean clothes you are wearing? Whether straight from the dry cleaners or your washing machine, the wheel made that happen. The clean dishes you ate from this evening? Hopefully a big meal if you are able to fast...the wheel made that dishwasher work. The watch you are already checking? The wheel made that happen, too...even your digital Apple Watch or Fitbit wouldn't exist without the many wheels and circular motions of oil rigs. Reinventing the wheel is the unheralded driving force behind progress, even if it gets

a bad rap from an overused cliché. We can see it at the start of this new year in both ourselves and in our synagogue.

Though we know that Yom Kippur isn't entirely **about** us — for whom will you serve as an agent in the coming year? — it *is* **up to us** to make progress, to make a difference, each new year. Have you ever wondered why the book you hold in your hands on the holidays is called by a different name than the book from which we pray on Shabbat? *Siddur*, the prayerbook for Shabbat, comes from the Hebrew word for “order” as we offer our prayers in the same order as our ancestors some 1,500 years ago. The prayerbook for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur — and Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot — is called a *machzor*, the word for the annual cycle or wheel of time. Each year that passes and each return to this sacred season offers us the opportunity for reflection. This ritualized chance to make progress as people is thanks to a *conceptual* wheel. The wheel is the wheel, the calendar the calendar — October follows September, Cheshvan thank God follows Tishrei, the 16th follows the 15th — the wheel of the calendar turns, but we have the opportunity to reinvent that wheel...or rather use it to reinvent ourselves with its constant turning. The hopes, dreams, aspirations, and changes we seek may be all-encompassing or more focused in scope depending on the year we had and the joys or sorrows, successes or challenges we faced, but none of us are so stiff-necked or arrogant as to proclaim there is nothing we could do better. The calendar is going to be the same, it's still a wheel, but we are going to use it to make progress. We think hard about our actions and our choices; who we want to be and how we can make a difference; we think about what we want to be different when we return to this time next year in our own personal sense-and-respond process. “Reinventing the wheel is what has given human beings an edge,” Roma Agrawal says.

We are trying hard to do the same here at the synagogue as well. As our fearless leader Michelle Markowitz shared earlier in our service, we continue to move forward with our strategic planning process. Together with our partners at Outside Angle, we looked deeper into the congregation and community and listened harder to the wants and needs and hopes that emerged. Ultimately the decision as to

whether riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur is a uniquely Jewish act comes from the community rather than its rabbi, and we think we have heard you. Okay, not on that specific question perhaps — the debate rages on — but you know what I mean...and I think I know what **you** mean. Through listening sessions, constant ideation and refinement, and lots of work by Temple's lay leadership, we understand that Temple is doing many things right AND that we have lots more work to do. On little things, certainly — who *doesn't* want thicker toilet paper? — and on major things that are going to help us ensure Temple's relevance and vibrancy for a generation to come.

It would be impossible to quantify all of the things that this might entail — we are still working on it and will realistically always be working on it to adapt to the changing societal contexts in which we live — but let me give you some more concrete examples so that you have something to disagree about at tonight's break-the-fast. Let's talk who, how, and what.

First, who. Or whom. Subject, object, verb, preposition...I'm not an English teacher for a reason. For whom do we want a relationship with Temple Emanuel to be important? Reform Jews living in the South Hills, right? Well, and those of you who live in the city. And those who would self-define as Conservative Jews but who that heard Cantor Kalix and Jacob and Rebecca are awesome. And those of a younger generation who eschew denominational labels and are just looking for quality content. And those who don't consider themselves Jewish but who are committed to a Jewish partner or a Jewish family. For whom do we want a relationship with Temple Emanuel to be important? Oooh, and our ECDC community of course, many of whom have no connection to Judaism but want the excellence we provide for their kids. And the many unaffiliated Jews trying to maintain Jewish lives without support of the traditional institutional infrastructure, I'd really rather not write them off. And the people regardless of religious affiliation who are turning to Temple for volunteer projects and who then develop positive, values-aligned relationships with the Jewish community...seems like an important long-game against antisemitism. And...

It's a really long list of people for whom we say that having a relationship with Temple is important...but we don't always act that way. Our governance structure ensures only some of these important people have a voice...and that Temple has access to but a fraction of the amazingness — the talent, the ideas, the energy — in our community. Our financial structure is such that only a fraction of those interacting with Temple seek to do so philanthropically. Our affiliation structure means we prioritize some of the people on that list over others in terms of resources and opportunities. We're still working on it, and realistically we will always be working on it, but there **has** to be a better way.

So let's talk about how. Let's say you are one of the many people in the South Hills community and beyond who says "Hey, I see value in what they are doing over there at Temple Emanuel. It seems like time to take a closer look." You call Temple, you come to a program or a service, and wham: we hit you with a membership application. Join us, we say, and we mean...but I'm not sure we are going about this one the right way. Maybe you or your partner didn't grow up in the Jewish community and the notion of "membership dues" is a foreign concept. Maybe you had a really bad experience in a different congregation where discussions over your monetary contributions felt judgy and off-putting. Maybe you have recently finished High School, where the JCC paid you a stipend to participate in learning opportunities, or college, where Hillel paid you a stipend to participate in programming, or attended a Birthright trip, where the Jewish world marshaled its resources to send you for free...and now you are being asked for instead of handed money. Maybe you have recently cancelled your cable contract, are moving to having the panoply of subscription services, and just don't consider yourself a joiner. Maybe there was a time in life where you were once a synagogue super-user — when your car knew its own way here, likely during Torah Center and the B'nei Mitzvah extravaganza — and now that life circumstances have changed what you need from your synagogue community has changed. There are myriads reasons that the membership model of synagogue engagement is no longer serving us well. We're still working on it and look forward to sharing

more in the coming year, but there **has** to be a better way to increase both participation-driven vibrancy *and* financial sustainability.

Before we talk about the what, allow me to remind you that it is reinventing the wheel that has given human beings the edge. Significantly changing the foundational structures that are no longer serving us while maintaining the best of what we offer the community is where the magic will happen. We thought about the radical change of closing down the synagogue to open up a bagel shop, but that's actually not what we heard from you. It sounded to us — in the listening sessions and ideological explorations — that people are generally happy with the overall direction in which Temple is going. Okay, yes, no one would *mind* better bagels at every event...to go with the thicker toilet paper...we did hear you...and there are indeed many occasions on which we need to keep hearing you as we co-create within the reaffirmed relevance of Temple's mission and vision statements.

This is where you each come in. Ultimately the decision as to whether riding a bicycle on Yom Kippur is a uniquely Jewish act comes from you and not from me. As a Temple, as a staff, we need to put into place better structures and more frequent efforts to sense-and-respond to the needs of the congregation. You are telling us — with your feet, mainly, and with your voice and with your dollars — what matters to you, and we as a Temple team and board commit ourselves to do a better job listening. Sometimes that's going to mean leaning further into areas and partnerships we haven't before — additional Introduction to Judaism offerings and onramps, expanded ways to get involved in action and advocacy within the greater community — and sometimes it means letting go of programs, practices, or even worship offerings that are no longer meaningful to the vast majority of people who make Temple theirs. We're still listening, we are watching even more closely what you choose to do, and we look forward to sharing more in the coming year; and the year after that; and the year after that.

That's kind of how reinventing the wheel works. The wheel itself is awesome. It allowed our ancient ancestors, and us, to cover more

ground more efficiently. And by turning that same basic structure on its side, we were able to create pottery and transform whole grains and power the mechanical world. With a bit of careful reinvention, that very same wheel that helped us traverse distance can help us create wonders heretofore unimaginable. So, too, it is with ourselves and our synagogue. As we ride the conceptual wheel of the year 5784, as we think about how a bit of reinvention will make ourselves and our experience of the year better; so to do we as a synagogue think about how preserving the best of what we do while reexamining, reinventing the underlying structures will allow us to meet the needs of the Jewish future. Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it, Jewish tradition teaches. Let's keep reinventing that wheel. Round though that wheel is, reinventing it is what will continue to give each of us an edge.