

The Blessings and Curses of Instant Communication

Rosh Hashanah 5774, September 5, 2013 – Mount Zion Temple – Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker

This past July, 1.2 million people read the following tweet: “The heavens over Chicago have opened and Patricia Lyons Simon Newman has stepped onstage.” Patricia was the mother of Scott Simon who shared this message about the end of her life. Simon, the host of NPR’s weekend edition, had spent the previous few weeks by his mother’s bedside in the most intimate, challenging, and powerful of human interactions as she lay dying. All the while, he sent messages about his experience via Twitter bringing over a million people along his and his mother’s journey.¹

Alone together. Simon was alone with his mother and through social media not at all alone. He found a way to use the tools of technology to bring others into the hospice room.

Using technology well is not always easy. We live in an age with a dizzying speed of instant communication. In a relatively few number of years, there are so many new ways of occupying our increasingly segmented time: cellphones and now smartphones; emailing, texting, and tweeting; Facebook, Skype, and Snapchat.

The benefits of these technologies are abundant. There are dangers as well, some not so obvious. More than 1,500 pedestrians were estimated to have been treated in emergency rooms in 2010 for injuries related to using a cell phone *while walking*. 1500 people injured because of being distracted while walking². This is almost a 500% increase in only five years.

We have new technologies, but we have not mastered them yet. In the meantime, have they mastered us? Have we developed new habits of checking texts and emails that distract us from the people in front of us?

There is a two minute [video](#) on YouTube that moves through one day in a woman’s life.

It begins in bed with her husband, an intimate scene of two people embraced as they sleep, but then the camera pans out and we see the husband holding a smartphone over the woman’s head answering email. Next scene, they are on a hike in the middle of a beautiful landscape, alone in nature but the man is talking loudly on the phone while away from him the woman gazes at the serene view. Later, she sees another couple on the beach where it looks like the man has just proposed; and as the couple embraces, the man pulls out his phone to take a picture at arm’s length. They are out for dinner laughing with four other people, all having a good time; the woman is talking and then realizing that the other five are staring down at their devices in their own worlds. Three kids swinging on a swing set not interacting, each looking down at their phone or electronic game; a dozen people bowling; one gets a strike – no one notices; a birthday party in a crowded living room. The woman is blowing out the candles in the dark, the light in the room comes from the candles on the cake and the screen in front of

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/09/scott-simon-tweets_n_3721527.html

² <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/distractwalk.htm>

every single person at the party videotaping the moment with their phone, ready to upload it to Facebook.

We can relate to at least some of these scenes for ourselves or we have witnessed them with people in our lives. These scenes are not exaggerations. Our day to day lives have changed so quickly that we are not always thoughtful of the balanced use of technologies.

By the way, has everyone silenced their phone? I love that new instruction; instead of turning them off, we silence them. And what happens if your phone buzzes? Will you look down, decide whether the text, email, call is more important than the service? Let's leave that rhetorical.

There are new questions of etiquette and relationship ethics that only a few years ago did not exist. Of course some of this is generational, differences between the so-called digital natives and those who remember actually dialing telephones. However, those who are most prone to succumb to technological temptation can truly be of any age.

We succumb because there are so many advantages. As Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel taught: "The old shall become new and the new shall become holy."

New technologies actually make *panim el panim*, face to face, relationships possible when being in the same space is impossible. There is holiness to technology when a grandparent can skype a grandchild across the county and develop a relationship and presence in a young child's life.

New technologies make our planet truly a small world. There is holiness when a small group of protestors can share their message with the world, in their own uncensored words, via Twitter.

New technologies democratize information. There is holiness when we can access the latest medical information literally at our fingertips and can diagnose our symptoms.

What is new can be holy.

And with the exception of writing the Torah -- remarkably done the same way today as when writing the Dead Sea Scrolls -- the Jewish people have always engaged in the latest technologies. Even two millennia ago, the primary project of our ancestors who left their homeland after the destruction of the Temple, was a new communication technology called the Talmud. Author Jonathan Rosen argues that the Talmud is very much like the Internet. The Talmud has side notes that link pages from one book to another across its 63 tractates like hypertexts and is metaphorically called "a sea." So too we surf the Internet which has hyperlinks: "The Talmud offered a virtual home for an uprooted culture," Rosen writes, "and grew out of the Jewish need to pack civilization into words and wander out into the world ... The Internet, which we are continually told binds us together, nevertheless engenders ... a similar sense of diaspora, a feeling of being everywhere and nowhere. Where else but in the middle of Diaspora do you need a home page?"³

³ The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey Between Worlds, Jonathan Rosen, (Picador: 2001)

Our constant access to the world through our new technologies has its costs. You know your life is different today than it was only a few years ago: 1) if you have a list of 20 phone numbers to reach five people; 2) if you struggle to stay in touch with any family members who do not have an email address; 3) if you use your phone to call your family to dinner and the text comes back, “what’s for dinner?” 4) if your feeling of accomplishment is measured in emails deleted; 5) if you are waiting in line at the grocery store and are impatient because you left your smartphone in the car; 6) if you wake up at 2am to go to the bathroom and check your E-mail on your way back to bed.

These challenges may be new, but the concerns are not. Though he never sat in front of a computer, T.S. Eliot characterized modernity as a time when people are “distracted from distraction by distraction.” (from the *Quartet*) Our new devices are merely tools; we succumb to their allures because we humans so willingly wish to escape.

And when we are not escaping, we can be present in the lives of people we care about, but we can also fool ourselves about how present we are. Technologies can speed our connections but dull our compassion. It is hard to be in contact through Facebook, emails, texts with so many stories, so many anecdotes, so many needs. Think of the speed at which you can delete messages, scan status updates, and peer into friends’ lives *without fully noticing*.

“Technology celebrates connectedness, but encourages retreat,” author Jonathan Safran Foer counsels. “Psychologists who study empathy...are finding that unlike our almost instantaneous responses to physical pain, it takes time for the brain to comprehend the...moral dimensions of a situation. The more distracted we become, and the more emphasis we place on speed at the expense of depth, the less ... able we are to care.”

Foer analyzes how we have been affected by our new capabilities in his essay, [How Not To Be Alone](#), in the [New York Times](#) this past June:

“Most of our communication technologies began as diminished substitutes” he writes. “... We couldn’t always see one another face to face, so the telephone made it possible to keep in touch at a distance. One is not always home, so the answering machine ...And then texting, which facilitated yet faster, and more mobile, messaging. These inventions were ... a declension of [what was] acceptable....

But then a funny thing happened: we began to prefer the diminished substitutes. It’s easier to make a phone call than to schlep to see someone in person. Leaving a message on someone’s machine is easier than having a phone conversation — you can say what you need to say without a response.... So we began calling when we knew no one would pick up.

Shooting off an e-mail is easier, still, because one can hide behind the absence of vocal inflection.... Each step “forward” has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey *information* rather than *humanity*.”

Let me be clear: this is not an anti-technology message, it is an awareness message.

I remember not too long ago being counseled at a rabbinic conference never to call congregants on your cell phone because they will know you don't really care to take the time for the conversation. Now I am texted about deaths in the congregation. We keep moving the bar farther down the line of what is acceptable, but we have not stopped to assess whether it is for the best.

We need to notice what happens to us. Technology may be 24/7, but we are not. Just because we are able to bring work into the home and home into work doesn't mean that we ought to. Just because we can share on Facebook that we are now cooking dinner, now shopping, doesn't mean we ought to. We very quickly develop new habits and like tics, they are hard to stop. Just like the flow of water carves rock slowly over time, our sense of self is carved, too, by the flow of our habits. Seventeenth century British poet John Dryden said "We first make our habits, then our habits make us."

Charles Duhigg argues in his best-selling book, *The Power of Habit*, that habits are so powerful because your brain stops fully participating in decision-making and focuses on other tasks. Even new habits trigger the brain automatically. The ding of a new text message will send you Pavlovian-like to your phone no matter whether you are in the middle of a conversation or enjoying a concert or a walk, unless you consciously change your behavior.

It is amazing how quickly these habits can be created. I know people, myself included, who could not imagine the need for having email on one's phone. "I need my space, my boundaries where work won't find me," I reasoned only three years ago. Today, I cannot imagine not looking at email anytime I have five minutes of so-called free time. When writing this sermon, I was completely "plugged in" checking email, looking at news on the internet, my smartphone on the table with my tablet at the ready.

Yet I remember writing out notes for my first High Holy Day sermon at Mount Zion on yellow legal pads. The truth is, until I turn off the computer and go on a long bike ride, I cannot free my mind enough to put clear thoughts together.

Just because we can, does not mean we should. Are you more or less likely to be checking your phone this Rosh Hashanah than last? Perhaps this is the measure of how quickly our habits have changed. What is the impact of the increased screen time we all have in our lives? What human interactions and skills are we losing? What is happening to our attention spans? We are becoming more distracted. Maybe these are the tradeoffs of all the good that has come from our technology. Maybe we have not found the right balance yet.

There are times like these Days of Awe when we are open, possibly, to examining our lives and making changes small and large. When we stop to think about our routines, we know that we need times of disconnection as well as being plugged in.

We need to be alone sometimes going to a remote place like Thoreau, or in the sense of time like Shabbat. Rav Kook taught: "The greater the soul, the more it must struggle to find itself. One must have extended solitude – *hitbodedut* – examining ideas, deepening thoughts, and

expanding the mind, until finally the soul will truly reveal itself, unveiling some of the splendor of its brilliant inner light.”

Each of us finds our own different balance. We can each distinguish between what is necessary and what is distraction. Distractions are fine until they take over, until they are not bounded, not contained either by time or by space.

We can shape our habits – actually change them – by creating boundaries away from our screens and phones. This can be in particular spaces, such as bedrooms, that become screen free zones. It could be through times, like dinner and Shabbat that become screen free moments. This is about your personal reflection and of course conversation and compromises with others. Maybe the backseat of the car is ok, but the dinner table is not. Maybe all of Shabbat is too long to power down but an agreed on period during Shabbat for *panim el panim*, true face to face interaction without interruptions, is possible.

Perhaps the greatest gift you can give yourself or your loved one is to walk out of the house without your phone. Go out for coffee. Don't take your phone. Show yourself and others what that looks like, that you're willing to step out of the house not open for outside communication.⁴

Judaism teaches us to channel our desires not deny them. Whether our desire is for food, drink, or intimacy, these desires have the potential for harm to self or others, but if controlled, can be used for the good, for relationship and connection.

Our New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is not like the secular New Year. We are not holding Champaign glasses in a party sharing our New Year resolutions. We are in a sanctuary, reflective, asking ourselves privately: Do my daily actions reflect my values? Am I living up to the life I wish to be living? And now, am I balancing my digital relationships with my in-person relationships?

The blessings and curses of technology are in our hands. “The old shall become new and the new shall become holy.” הישן יתחדש וחדש יתקדש. *HaYashan Yitchadesh v'Chadash Yitkadesh*. We need to translate our ancient teachings for the new situations we face.

And when we do so, balancing what is good in the old and what is good in the new – understanding why a powerful moment of saying goodbye to a mother in hospice can be shared through technology beautifully – then we will transform our lives into holiness.

Ken yih ratzon. Be this God's will and our will power.

⁴ This idea is from Sherry Turkle, Director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. She shared it in an interview with Krista Tippett on her show *On Being* last November. The interview inspired this sermon. <http://www.onbeing.org/program/alive-enough-reflecting-our-technology/63>