

Talk to Me: Erev RH Sermon 5774

Rabbi Leora Frankel

It was a late Saturday night in December, at our annual COSY shul-in overnight, when the youth group sleeps at the synagogue. Walking into the library, I entered a scene that is still etched in my mind: a dozen or so teens sitting in a circle on the floor—each completely absorbed with his or her own individual iPhone. “Hi guys,” I greeted them. “Don’t you, maybe, want to actually hang out with each other?” A few teens shrugged and put down their phones. But one of them—without missing a beat—shot back, “We ARE hanging out with each other.” Then he promptly went back to updating his Facebook status.

Similar scenes are familiar from Starbucks, the library, and even our kitchen table. Is it possible the teens are right? That we are meaningfully connecting with each other, not face-to-face but screen-to-screen? Over the last year I have grappled with this and similar questions—as a rabbi and educator, and also as a spouse and parent. How can modern technology foster community? And, at the same time, how can it isolate us, creating a culture that MIT Professor Sherry Turkle calls “Alone Together.”

Since last spring’s Snowden scandal, it seems like we’re never really alone, that there’s always someone looking over our shoulder or listening in. It’s like the High Holy Days all year around, only instead of God inscribing us in the Book of Life, it’s some NSA agent in Virginia adding us to the “Safe to Fly” list. But despite our sincere concerns about privacy violations, we also *choose* to broadcast our lives in unprecedented

ways. We post tweets, status updates, photos for the world to see, motivated by a healthy dose of narcissism, but primarily, I believe, because we crave connection.

For many of us the Internet—much more than the synagogue or our neighborhood—is the social glue of our lives. Facebook helps 1.1 billion users worldwide keep tabs on far-flung relatives, re-unite with long-last college roommates, and admire a friend’s new baby without actually having to smell her diapers. I have been the ultimate beneficiary of the social media revolution, having met my husband, Andrew, on J-Date. While we only exchanged one volley of messages through the actual website before he suggested “let’s meet in person,” it was all thanks to one fateful click of a mouse that I met my soul mate.

Over this past year, I have seen technology and social media bring people together in masterful and moving ways. Our Shabbat service via conference call during last winter’s blizzard was a creative and inspiring solution to being snowed in. As I belted out *L’cha Dodi* in my basement, I imagined the prayerful notes coursing through telephone lines from Port Chester to Rye Brook, Harrison, Rye, and beyond. Each of us sat in our own homes—perhaps bathing our kids or sipping wine by the fire—as a blanket of white covered the roads. Yet there was a palpable sense of community, as evidenced by some of your comments on Facebook that night. As one congregant posted: “This is the coolest Shabbat ever- worshipping by using electronics under rabbinic discretion!”

And during my 10 days at the Hartman seminar in Jerusalem this past July, Apple's Facetime app proved an invaluable way to stay connected to my husband and 18-month-old daughter back at home. I switched on the iPad and could instantly see their faces some 6,000 miles and 7 time zones away. Miriam would erupt in excitement when our devices synced and she could wave at Mommy a world away. But after a few minutes of blowing kisses at me through the laptop, she would start to get confused and frustrated, reaching her hands out to touch my face and smacking up against the screen. *I was there but I wasn't.*

My toddler's innocent perspective captures something about how many of us adults experience this new age of social media and technology. We are there but we aren't, and so too, it seems, are our companions. Our web of relationships is broader than ever, but it has grown shallower too. Think about it: How many of your countless online contacts know what is really going on in your life, let alone in your head?

Just recently, I was speaking to good friend—let's call her Molly—whom I had been conversing with mostly through Facebook over the summer. I am always entertained by her upbeat status updates and radiant Instagrams. But when we finally managed to catch up by phone, Molly immediately broke down in tears, admitting to me how lonely and unhappy she's felt recently. I was shocked at the dissonance between her real-life self and online impressions.

Recent research¹ has confirmed what many of us have learned anecdotally; we can have hundreds of Facebook “friends” but still feel a festering emptiness deep inside, a solitude of our souls. One reason, I suspect, is that our online profiles break us down into such discrete parts that they fragment our sense of self even as we seek to project a polished whole. We are asked to check off boxes for age, gender, religion, relationship status, career, and so on, capturing a snapshot of who we are—or at least want to be—at any given moment. All of the idiosyncrasies that make us unique, that make us human really, get streamlined into a digital caricature of ourselves that often fails to capture our most essential qualities. There is no check box for maternal instinct or moral compass, no way to tag yourself rushing outside to help a stranger who’s collapsed on the sidewalk.

Without this nuance, our relationships through Facebook or LinkedIn are often reduced to what theologian Martin Buber describes as a dynamic of “I-It.” In his seminal essay *I and Thou* (originally *Ich und Du*, in German) Buber explains that we relate to both objects and people in the “I-It” mode when we simply exchange information in transactional conversations. The converse of “I-It” is the ideal “I-Thou,” a meeting of the minds and hearts that leaves an imprint on both individuals. Much of our life is spent in a state of I-It, which Buber admits is necessary to keep life moving forward. “But,” he warns, “If a man lets *It* have the mastery, the continually growing world of *It* overruns him and robs him of the reality of his own *I*.”² In other words, we lose a part of ourselves when we spend more time talking to Siri than our spouse.

¹ See <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/> and http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/01/why-loneliness-can-be-contagious/?_r=0.

² Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Edinburgh: Morrison & Gibb, 1937. p. 46.

In contrast to this ever-more immersive virtual landscape, it is striking how many fundamental elements of Jewish life are predicated on being physically present with real, live human beings. We need a *minyan*, a quorum of ten people together in the same room, to say central prayers like the Mourner’s *Kaddish* or to publically read Torah. Our tradition even discourages studying sacred texts without a *chevrutah* or “study buddy” at our side. There is a beautiful line in the Talmud that teaches: When two or more people sit together and study Torah, the *Shechinah* is present.³ I wonder, does God similarly bless a g-chat? Do Divine sparks equally emanate from a cyber *Beit Midrash*?

It would be faster, easier, and probably more entertaining to just let one of the many Torah-chanting apps belt out the appropriate trope each Saturday morning. We could put our iPhone down on the *bimah* and customize the voice like a GPS. “This week I think I’d like a cantor with a British accent,” we’d say and hit “play.” But somehow it just wouldn’t feel right—not only because we all love Cantor Cooperman. We would miss the tactile experience of touching our *Sefer Torah*, of hearing those ancient words and melodies chanted in real time. This is one of the brilliant, countercultural aspects of Judaism. In a world where more and more of us do our reading on kindles and iPads, each Shabbat we still come together as the People of the Book.

In a recent NYTimes Op-Ed, author Jonathan Safran Foer reflects on how each wave of new technology simultaneously brings us closer together and further apart. He

³ Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 6a.

writes, “These inventions were not created to be *improvements upon face-to-face communication but a declension of acceptable, if diminished, substitutes for it*... 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... Shooting off an e-mail is easier, still, because one can hide behind the absence of vocal inflection... And texting is even easier... Each step “forward” has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity.”⁴

I think Foer hit the nail on the head. Our endless stream of one directional messages protects us from ever being completely vulnerable with another person and prevents us from having the I-Thou moments we yearn for. Communication has become effortless, in both senses of the word. In our over-programmed, maxed-out lives, we let friends know we are thinking of them simply by hitting a virtual thumbs-up button or posting “Happy Birthday” on their Facebook wall. All this technological “progress,” however, comes at a cost. Our relationships never actually progress beyond “I-It.”

Even as the Internet has increased the speed and volume of our communication, it also threatens to diminish the impact of our words. As Sherry Turkle puts it, we have come to “expect more of technology and less from each other.” With tweets limited to 140 characters, no one expects complete thoughts or emotional depth anymore. Why bother with actual feelings when we can insert emoticons? But as Foer warns us, “The problem with accepting — with preferring — diminished substitutes is that over time, *we*,

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/opinion/sunday/how-not-to-be-alone.html>, emphasis added.

too, become diminished substitutes. People who become used to saying little become used to feeling little.”⁵

Judaism proposes a radically different paradigm. Each Torah scroll in this ark contains 304,805 letters, all of which must be precisely hand-written by a trained *sofer* in order to be *kosher*, because our tradition teaches that “if you add or subtract even a single letter, [it is as if] you have destroyed the entire world!”⁶ And it was not for lack of skilled copy editors that the Talmud recounts such lengthy rabbinic debates, often without ever coming to a conclusion or legal ruling. The *ikar*, the essential point, for them, was engaging in the dialogue. Fifteen hundred years since that Talmud was redacted, we are still living out the words of these rabbis. But somehow, along the way, *we* have un-learned the art of conversation.

Ron Wolfson, one of our modern-day Sages, advocates that synagogues will only continue to exist if we reclaim a *Relational Judaism*—the title of his latest book, which our Board of Trustees and staff will be reading together this year. He offers a profoundly simple strategy for rebuilding Jewish community and finding meaning in our lives: We have to learn to talk to each other again and start sharing our stories.⁷ As Buber put it so beautifully, only in those unplugged, intimate conversations, do we fully experience “knowing and being known, loving and being loved.”⁸

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/09/opinion/sunday/how-not-to-be-alone.html>

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, *Eruvin* 13a

⁷ Wolfson, Ron. *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2013.

⁸ Buber, p. 103.

The transformative capacity of a conversation really came home to me this summer. It was 6:30 am on *Rosh Chodesh Av*, and I joined a hundred or so rabbinic colleagues boarding chartered buses to the *Kotel*. I didn't realize at first that these buses were also full of local Jerusalemites until I randomly sat down in one of the few empty seats next to a young Israeli woman. Excited for the chance to speak Hebrew, I struck up a conversation with her. Why was she joining Women of the Wall that morning, I asked. Had she been before? What did it all mean to her?

I do not remember the woman's name, if I ever learned it. But I can clearly see her face and vividly recall her talking about being a young mother herself, and about the kind of Jewish democracy she wants Israel to be for her children. Though we wound up being separated by the crowds once we arrived at the crowded Western Wall plaza, our conversation still rings in my ears. The inflections in her voice, the kindness of her smile, her real human presence. More than the experience of being surrounded by thousands of *hareidi* protestors, my lingering sense impressions of that morning are of this one stranger whose fate now feels bound up with my own. It was an I-Thou moment.

In retrospect, I feel lucky that during my 10-minute bus ride through Jerusalem I did not have cell service or wifi, as I typically do here. Otherwise, I almost certainly would have spent it catching up on e-mail, face in my iPhone, completely distracted from the real, live person sitting next to me. One of my favorite *midrashim*, or rabbinic legends, warns us of the potential risks of being distracted: When the Red Sea parted our ancestors were awestruck, singing and dancing as they made their way across to freedom.

But the rabbis speak of two men, Reuven and Shimon, who were so distracted by what was beneath their feet they never looked up to witness the wonder. “Yuck,” complained Reuven, “my shoes are covered in muck.” “Yeah,” answered Shimon. “This is just like the mud we used to make bricks back in Egypt.” And so they went along *kvetching*, heads down and totally distracted. They missed the miracle. They missed the moment.

When the clergy would pass around a basket to collect our 7th graders’ cell phones during class this year, there was such protest that you would think we were asking them to go without oxygen or cut off a hand. It was comical. Yet we adults, too, experience our phones as an extension of our own bodies at times. “How powerful is the unbroken world of the *It*,” Martin Buber prophesied back in 1923.⁹ Still today, unable to control ourselves, we sneak peeks at e-mail while feigning interest at board meetings or around the dinner table. “I’m listening honey, I promise,” we reassure our loved ones. But the truth is, we aren’t. We are so used to 24-7 interruptions and divided attention that we excuse each other to grab a minute here, a minute there to respond to a text or e-mail. But in grabbing all these minutes, we miss the moments. We miss the miracles.

So as we prepare to enter this New Year, what can we do to ensure that we are fully present—for our families, our community, and ourselves? How can we cultivate a spiritual discipline around screen time as Judaism demands us to do around every other major aspect of our life? How can we transform some of our I-It exchanges into I-Thou encounters?

⁹ Buber, p. 98.

For one thing, we can pledge to hold each other accountable, to expect more from each other when we are interacting. This year, let's commit: No cell phones at the dinner table. No laptops in bed with us at night. It's something I know I am struggling with and I invite you to struggle with me. French philosopher Simone Weil wrote: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." So let's try in 5774 to be a little more generous with our attention and re-engage in real conversation, starting right here, right now.

We sit shoulder to shoulder in these pews, each of us full of our own individual regrets, hopes, and memories from the year that's passed. Alone, together. But if we create a space to share our stories and really pay attention to each other, we will all feel a little less "alone" and a great deal more "together." So in a second I'll ask you to put down your *machzor*, turn to someone near you, and ask them this question: "What is one moment you're glad you *didn't miss* this past year?" Then really listen to their answer and share your own. Keep in mind that some of us are sitting by ourselves, so please consider introducing yourself to a stranger. I promise you can do it without the help of Facebook.

May this be the first of many substantive exchanges in 5774, in which we allow ourselves to be a little more vulnerable, to be our real, imperfect selves—the ones behind our avatars and status updates. It is in these I-Thou moments of relation that we truly return to ourselves, and, as Buber reminds us, we return to God. *L'shanah Tovah.*