

A Different Kind of Fast: *Kol Nidrei* Sermon 5779

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Kol Nidre night. There is simply nothing like it (not even the Yankee-Red Sox game tonight, though thank you for choosing to be here instead of in the Bronx). *Kol Nidre*, that most memorable prayer of our Jewish year, recited as our Torah scrolls stand as witnesses on our judgment day. *Kol Nidre*, that unforgettable soul-stirring melody. It sounds at times like a painful moan, as we beseech God to annual our vows and pardon our misdeeds.

A few years ago, when leading our Young Family Yom Kippur service upstairs, I invited the children and their parents to close their eyes while Cantor Cooperman sang a few refrains as she did so beautifully this evening. After listening, I asked the preschoolers what it sounded like to them. “Sad,” said one little girl. “Spooky,” offered another. “Like a haunted house!” exclaimed one boy. They were not wrong.

If we take it seriously, the whole experience of Yom Kippur is indeed a little scary, and that’s the point. We risk growing smug after ringing in the New Year to that triumphant *tekiya*. “So far (or as I like to say *shofar*) so good,” we think to ourselves. That’s when Yom Kippur brings us back down to size, reminding us of our fragility, our mortality. The older we get the more we understand that “Who shall live and who shall die” is not just a metaphor or hyperbole. We truly tremble while praying to be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year, because even more than the kids upstairs, we know it’s not a given, and that is frightening.

Rabbi Jack Reimer goes even a step further and describes Yom Kippur like this: “For twenty-four hours you wear white, you don’t eat, you don’t drink, you don’t have sex, and (less well-known) you don’t put on perfume or deodorant. Just look around the room on Yom Kippur

afternoon, say around four o'clock, at a bunch of Jews who have been observing the above laws and customs and you realize you're looking at a room full of people who are [...] rehearsing their own deaths! [...] Yom Kippur is a day of death—the death of the old year, the death of the old sins, and the death of the old ego.”¹

Most of the year, Judaism is not an ascetic religion. If anything, it's just the opposite; we are commanded throughout the Torah and rabbinic law to eat, drink, and be merry. Nearly every holiday includes a ritual feast, and most ceremonies demand we raise a glass of wine—if not four! Unlike Hindus or Buddhists, our Scriptures encourage us to derive sensual satisfaction from God's creations and our own. In fact, the rabbis imagined that when the Divine tribunal is convened on our death day, one of the questions we'll be asked at heaven's gates is “Were there earthly pleasures permitted to you that you did not enjoy?”²

Yom Kippur is probably the best-known exception to this rule of indulgence. According to a recent Pew study, 40% of American Jews fast on Yom Kippur (which is remarkable because I can't imagine a room full of Jews agreeing about almost anything).³ In Leviticus, Moses instructs the Israelites that on *Yom HaKippurim*, this Day of Atonement, “וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֵׁיכֶם - You shall afflict your souls.”⁴ The early rabbis interpreted this as observing a day of physical abstinence while we engage in personal reflection and atonement. Culminating these 10 Days of *Teshuvah*, commonly translated as “repentance” but more accurately turning or returning, on Yom Kippur we heed the words of the prophet Joel: “*Shuv*- Turn back to your God with whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning...”⁵

¹ As told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in *Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation*. Edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.

² Origins in Talmud Tractate Shabbat 31a, translated by Ron Wolfson in *The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven*.

³ <http://www.pewforum.org/essay/american-and-israeli-jews-twin-portraits-from-pew-research-center-surveys/>

⁴ Leviticus 23:27.

⁵ Joel 2:12.

For those who are able and choose to fast, it is a reminder that “man does not live by bread alone,”⁶ a tangible demonstration of the self-discipline we seek to strengthen in the New Year ahead. We hope the experience of spending a day hungry might cultivate in us greater empathy for those who never know when they’ll get their next meal. Most commonly though, we’re taught that the point of fasting is to shift our focus away from basic, bodily needs to the spiritual accounting we are called upon to do on Yom Kippur.

When I first learned this as a child and still today, I find the logic somewhat backwards. What is more distracting from serious concentration than a rumbling stomach?

As tomorrow morning’s Haftorah challenges us through the voice of Isaiah, I too wonder: “Is this the fast that God desires?”⁷ Is *eating* really what is most getting in our way of connecting with each other and the Divine? I know in my own life, when it comes to focusing on what matters most, I have far bigger distractions than food. The truth is that nine out of ten times when I am not properly tuned in to the voice of God or those most dear to me, it is because I’ve become utterly absorbed with *this* [cell phone]. And I know I am not alone.

A good portion of my week is spent with the synagogue’s youth in our Center for Jewish Learning and CSR Teens Program which I oversee. Last night kicked off my ninth year of Monday night pizza dinners with our 7th-12th graders in the congregation, and somehow the scene that first September evening is always the same: Dozens of teenagers sitting around tables together, each of them head down towards their phone and completely disconnected from the friends right next to them.

Every fall it catches me by surprise. “Hi guys, I interject. It’s so great to see everyone! Isn’t it nice to be together again after the summer break?” I pause, looking around at their faces,

⁶ Deuteronomy 8:3.

⁷ Isaiah 58:1-14.

all still focused on their phones as they half nod in response to my question. I grow bolder. “Hey, hey guys. You didn’t schlepp all the way to the synagogue in the rain just to stare at your screens. Don’t you want to actually hang out with each other?” “We ARE hanging out with each other!” one seventh grade boy retorts. “Look I’m snapchatting with Sophie.”

For those of you less familiar with this trendy app, Snapchat is a messaging platform where users can send each other photos or short videos that flash for a few moments and then disappear. The teens love Snapchat, not only because of the special effects. It’s quick and easy to reach a friend; just take a photo, add a doodle or caption, and hit send. The snap goes to exactly whom you want and then gets deleted after ten seconds. Like secret spy telegrams of mystery novels, these messages literally self-destruct after being viewed.

To adolescents, a snap or Instagram feels like authentic self-expression, a unique if ephemeral moment of sharing. And left to their own devices, this is precisely the “hanging out” many of our teens would spend their entire Monday night doing if our educators didn’t convince them to put away their cell phones and force them into meaningful human interactions. Rest assured, that’s exactly what we do, and our nearly 60 teens had a blast together last night. I’ll tell you though, when we successfully wrest those phones from their hands the adults in the room feel as victorious as comic book superheroes who have just saved the world.

I trust the scene I described is familiar—our children or grandchildren, kids around the neighborhood, walking around, faces in their phones. But let’s be honest. It’s not just them. We adults are also tethered to our gadgets. So rarely does anyone look up anymore that walking down a midtown Manhattan sidewalk can be a full-contact sport if we’re not careful.

I read an interview about three astronauts sent into space. They were asked how it felt to be up there circling the earth. The first gasped, “It was remarkable. I put out my thumb and it

covered the entire planet Earth. For the first time, I understood both how vast and finite our world is.” The second astronaut gushed, “What struck me were the sunrise and sunsets. They were just magnificent from up there. It made you really appreciate the passing of time.” The third man remained silent, looking almost a little disappointed. The reporter prodded, “What was going through your mind as you circled the globe?” With a sigh the third astronaut responded, “I just kept thinking, ‘I really should have upgraded my iPhone. The new model has such a better camera!’”

Now in our defense, much of the time we spend on our phones may be legitimately productive or necessary. We use our phones to check work e-mail, monitor the stock market, catch up on current events. There are many apps that can even improve our lives, help us lose weight or meditate, avoid traffic jams, and manage our never-ending to-do lists. The CCAR, our movement’s rabbinic assembly, just launched a new Jewish calendar app called Reform *Luach* that keeps track of holidays, weekly Torah portions, yahrzeit dates and more. Download it tomorrow night if you haven’t already. Frankel and Gropper give it two thumbs up!

For all of the good reasons we have to appreciate our phones though, we love them just a little too much. At times, the relationship we have with our phone might seem more intimate than with our spouse. We carry them with us wherever we go, take them into the bathroom with us, sleep with them by our side. When we accidentally forget them on the kitchen counter or in the car, it feels as if we have lost an appendage.

According to research from the media analytics company comScore, the average American adult spent approximately 2 hours and 51 minutes on their smartphone every single day in the year 2017.⁸ At a synagogue Education Council meeting last year, I asked this group

⁸ <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/Mobile-Matures-as-the-Cross-Platform-Era-Emerges>

of CJL parents what activities their families most enjoy doing together and what most gets in the way of it happening more. They each lit up describing fishing and skiing trips, living room dance parties, and beach vacations. Then I repeated my follow-up question: “What most gets in the way of your family making these memories more often?” Nearly every person in the room had the same answer: technology.

In my *Erev* Rosh Hashanah sermon, I spoke about how we have lost the art of listening, how preoccupied most of us are walking through the world. We miss so many precious opportunities to connect—with our loved ones, our innermost selves, and with God—because instead of listening to the symphony of voices around us, our ears are always glued to our phones. Or, as I often find in my family, we’re so busy trying to capture the moment in a perfect picture, that we miss the moment in real life.

My daughter Judith, born almost exactly two years ago on Rosh Hashanah morning, just recently learned how to ask her first full question. “What you doin’ mama?” she’s constantly inquiring in the cutest toddler cadence. “I’m brushing my teeth,” I tell her, or “I’m cooking dinner.” A few weeks ago as I sat scrolling through my Facebook feed while she made a Magna-tile tower in our den, she chirped, “What you doin’ mama?” I was stumped. How could I explain to her what I was doing on Facebook when I should be down on the floor playing with her. She made me think, “What exactly *am* I doing?”

And my older daughter, Miriam, has already caught on to grown-ups’ phone addiction and doesn’t beat around the bush anymore. “Get off your phone please mommy,” she scolds me impatiently if I’m on my screen. I hear that same plea each week in the halls of our Preschool, in the library and on the playground, where children constantly compete with phones for their parents’ attention. You know it’s bad when *our kids are begging us* to stop texting and not vice

versa. So from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, I decided it was time to take a break from Facebook and focus on more actual face-time. It was hard at first, but it worked.

This phenomenon of paying attention to our phones when we should be focused on people is so widespread now it has its own lexicon of slang. If your conversation is interrupted by the beep of some digital device, it's called *techno-ference*.⁹ If you're snubbing a companion—say, your child or husband—to look at your phone, well that's *phubbing* (with a “ph,” as in phone plus snubbing).¹⁰ I'm not sure which *Al Chet* precisely covers these offenses but I'm sure we're nearly all guilty of them.

As Sherry Turkle writes about extensively in her book *Alone, Together*, this technology that was invented to help us connect more easily has ultimately left us more isolated than ever. So during this season of *Teshuvah*, of course-correcting and recalibrating our priorities for the year ahead, the cleanse I know I need even more than a fast from food is a digital detox. You want to really fulfill the Torah's mitzvah of self-affliction, of resisting something we physically crave to help refocus us on what really matters? Take away this thing for 24 hours. I cannot know if it is the fast that God desires, but I'm certain it's one we all would spiritually benefit from.

Think about it: when was the last time you went an entire day without looking at your phone? I'm guessing it was in the middle of the Caribbean sea on a cruise ship, or on some similarly remote vacation when you were expected to be totally off the grid. But how about in your average, day-to-day life? Unless they're living in an Amish Village or are an Orthodox Jew, most Americans have looked at a cell phone just in the past hour.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/well/mind/the-phones-we-love-too-much.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/10/13/are-you-phubbing-right-now-what-it-is-and-why-science-says-its-bad-for-your-relationships/>

We celebrate our freedom from Egyptian bondage each time we sing *Mi Chamocha* or make *kiddush*. But long after our escape from Pharaoh, we have somehow become enslaved again, this by our own creations. We can't wait for a Moses to save us from the tangle of wires. It's time to liberate ourselves, even just for a little while each week.

With this in mind, a Jewish renaissance organization called "Reboot" started an annual "National Day of Unplugging" back in 2010.¹¹ They recognized that in the hi-tech world of today, most of us cannot or will not refrain from technology for 24 hours every single week. So they set a more modest goal for liberal Jews: Once a year, go cell phone free for a whole Shabbat. Designating a particular weekend, they encourage a global respite from technology. The goal is simple: In disconnecting from our digital devices, we are available to better connect with ourselves, our loved ones, and our community in real time. As some of you may recall from my *derash* about it last spring, I took the Day of Unplugging challenge back in March, and it was just as hard as it sounds. I love this Reboot campaign but have one suggestion for improvement: If we're going to pick just one day a year to totally unplug, it really should be now, on what the Torah calls *Shabbat Shabbaton*, this Sabbath of Sabbaths.

So I invite you all to join me in a different kind of fast this Yom Kippur. (To be clear, I still encourage you to refrain from eating and drinking if you are so moved and so able, but try this too.) If you're feeling ambitious, try powering down from now until the end of *Ne'ilah*, when we sound that final *tekiya gedolah*. Or if that feels like too daunting a proposition, try it for an hour to start and see how you feel. In fact, I recommend this not just for tomorrow but as a weekly practice every Shabbat, at least one solid hour with your phone out of sight, a chance to unplug so you can reconnect.

¹¹ <https://www.nationaldayofunplugging.com/>

I'm a realist though and so are the folks at Reboot. They know we're drawn to our phones like moths to a flame. We just can't help ourselves if it's in view. When we're fasting from food we do best to avoid looking at our refrigerator, and so too with our screens. So Reboot distributed 35,000 phone sleeping bags this past year to help make the separation anxiety from our phones just a little easier. Theirs are cool, but inspired by a local rabbinic colleague, I took the liberty of designing my own.¹²

Unlike Chanukah or Purim, Yom Kippur isn't typically a holiday of gift-giving but on your way out tonight, you'll each be receiving a goody bag from me. [Hold up CSR cell phone sleeping bags.]* You can pick your color, grab a matching set for the whole family. Whether you use it for just one hour or all twenty-four, I hope that it will help you more fully experience this awesome day of renewal and rebirth. *Gmar Chatimah Tovah*, may you and your loved ones all be sealed for a good year ahead, and may you have a *Tzom Kal*- an easy fast.

* If you were not able to join us in person for *Kol Nidrei* services but are inspired to unplug more this year, we still have a few cell phone sleeping bags left. Stop by the CSR office to pick up yours!

¹² Thanks to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Eytan Hammerman, for giving me this idea.