

Shana Tova

As the story goes, There are several men in the locker room of a private club after exercising.

Suddenly a cell phone that was on one of the benches rings. A man picks it up:

"Hello?"

"Honey, It's me. Are you at the club?"

"Yes,

'Great! I am at the mall 2 blocks from where you are. I saw a beautiful mink coat... It is absolutely gorgeous!! Can I buy it?"

"What's the price?"

"Only \$1,500.00"

"Well, OK, go ahead and get it if you like it that much..

"Umm, I also stopped by the Mercedes dealership and saw the 2010 models. I saw one I really liked. I spoke with the salesman and he gave me a really good price ... and since we need to exchange the BMW that we bought last year I thought..."

"What price did he quote you?"

"Only \$60,000..."

"OK, but for that price I want it with all the options."

"Great! Before we hang up, something else..."

"What?"

"It might look like a lot, but I was reconciling your bank account and... I stopped by the real estate agent this morning and saw the house we had looked at last year ... it's on sale!!

Remember? The one with a pool English Garden, acre of park area, beachfront property..."

"How much are they asking?"

"Only a million five... a magnificent price, and I see that we have that much in the bank to cover..."

"Well, then, go ahead and buy it, but just bid a million four. Don't go over. OK?"

"OK, sweetie... Thanks! I'll see you later!! I love you!!!"

"Bye... I do too..."

The man hangs up, closes the phone's flap and raises his hand while holding the phone and asks all those present: "Does anyone know who this cell phone belongs to?"

For those of you who feel passionately about cell phones, one way or the other, let me give you one name: Martin Cooper. In 1973 Mr. Cooper, who was a project manager for Motorola, decided it was time for people to be free of wires. To this end, he and his team built a phone that was about 10 or 11 inches high, 1 and a half inches across, four inches deep, and weighed two and a half pounds. It was the first cell phone.

My favorite part of this story is that for the first cell phone call, Mr. Cooper called Joel S. Engel, who happened to be the head of the cellular program for AT&T. AT&T was working furiously but unsuccessfully at creating their own version of a cellular phone. When Martin called Joel and said, "Joel, I'm calling you from a cellular phone, a real cellular phone, a handheld, portable, real cellular phone." There was only silence on the other line. Joel of course professes to having no memory of this conversation. I have a feeling it will not likely to go down as famously as Alexander Graham Bell's call to Thomas Watson.

For those of you who were in the market in 1973, that first phone would have set you back about one million dollars. It would be another ten years before it was commercially viable and by then; they were selling them for a mere four thousand dollars.

Of course nowadays they are sold for much less and can do so much more like just about every other technological development since the 1970s.

Speaking of technology, there was a recent article in USA Today about technology use by regions around the country. When a survey was conducted they found ipads were most popular in New York, which makes sense because the subway is a great place to consume such portable digital information. The Amazon Kindle is most popular in Massachusetts, and the local populace in Phoenix seems to be perfectly content with their cathode ray tube televisions and VCRs, yet another good reason to get out of dodge.

Maryland, in case you are wondering, tops the list for high definition television sets with the highest concentration of HDTV sets and comes in second only behind Michigan in ownership of point-and-shoot cameras.¹ So for those of you who have yet to purchase one, get out there because we can't come in second to Michigan!

Yet no matter where you live, there is a growing love affair with our technology. For the most part, we find ourselves more connected than ever before especially through social networking, texting, emailing, blogging, tweeting, and the like. But rather than get into a conversation about how technology can both enhance our lives and drain them at the same time, it is interesting to examine how it can affect our Judaism as well.

Recently I read a story in the Cincinnati Enquirer about a rabbi by the name of Laura Baum who was listed by the Jewish Daily Forward as one of the 50 most influential female rabbis for her “groundbreaking use of social media.”² While working for Beth Adam, a humanist congregation in the Cincinnati suburbs, Rabbi Baum launched an online outreach effort. The article doesn't mention much of what this means, but it does speak about how she is

¹ Usatoday.com

² Cincinnati.com

working to provide online streaming services and ways for members to connect with each other through online chatting, and the like. Essentially Rabbi Baum created an online congregation. It is a place where individuals can virtually connect up with each other by means of their Jewish heritage. There are some who believe this is the wave of the Jewish future as individuals and families are making the choice not to affiliate with a congregation.

Streaming is a great to give people a way to engage in worship services if they are unable to attend due to physical limitations, but the danger is if we set the bar so low. For example streaming of worship services could be done while facebooking and watching an Orioles or Ravens game at the same time all on the same computer. This creates some significant theological, philosophical, and metaphysical questions: How meaningful can a religious experience be surrounded by so much noise? Is there still space to encounter the Holy? Can one truly be said to be part of a community?

Technology is a way to spread communication, to keep in touch with friends and family, but not an ideal way to build community. Community is bound up not just in shared values and common purpose, but also in personal connections that are hard to do when you can't see or touch the person. There are other problems this connectivity poses as well.

In his book Hamlet's Blackberry, William Powers argues that all this connectivity runs the risk of isolating us from each other even more. For if we are so busy having lots of little digital interactions that demand a lot of our attention, are we really then having any genuine interactions at all? And even more so, all this connectivity removes us from even connecting to our surroundings.

As Mr. Powers goes states, "The goal is no longer to be 'in touch' but to erase the possibility of ever being out of touch. To merge, to live simultaneously with everyone, sharing

every moment, every perception, thought, and action via our screens. Even the places where we used to go to get away from the crowd and the burdens it imposes on us are now connected. The simple act of going out for a walk is completely different today from what it was fifteen years ago. Whether you're walking down a big-city street or in the woods outside a country town, if you're carrying a mobile device with you, the global crowd comes along. A walk can still be a very pleasant experience, but it's a qualitatively different experience, simply because it is busier. The air is full of people."³ It is almost an inverse relationship. The more connected we are technologically speaking, the less connected we tend to be to each other and to the immediate world around us. Despite these confounding issues, for many technology is becoming the new religion of the twenty first century.

What I mean by this is the web is fast becoming the all knowing all seeing enterprise science fiction writers have been warning us about for years. If you are an optimist, this can be the beginnings of a Star Trek Universe. And if you are a pessimist, it means the coming of the Terminator.

In either case are we becoming so infatuated with our technological prowess that we are losing our sense of self and our sense of God. If the web is all seeing and all knowing, what do we need God for?

The answer, our tradition would argue, is plenty. Now don't get me wrong. I am a technophile. I enjoy social networking, one of my treasured possessions is my iphone, and I think the DVR is one of the greatest inventions ever. And I could loft praises about the Internet for ages to come.

³ Powers, William, Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age, New Ork, Harper Collins, 2010, pg. 15

Yet the web and its ancillary endeavors, like all things scientific, is an exercise of inspiration, motivation, creativity, and individuals building upon the creations of previous generations. It is not the creation of a single human, but in the case of the web, is a creation by humanity, belonging to everyone and no one at the same time.

This of course leaves plenty of room for the creation of the illusion of knowledge and its subsequent abuse. Perhaps no story illustrates this better than Shirley Sherrod, the USDA's Director former Georgia Director for development whose taped story was heavily edited by a blogger in an attempt to demonstrate cases of reverse-racism in the government. Ms. Sherrod, an African American woman, was vilified by the press and fired by her supervisors, though no one bothered to watch the entirety of her speech and see how it was all about how she overcame her own prejudices to help a poor white farmer. In this case a deliberate distortion quickly became gospel, thus demonstrating what happens when it information gets into the wrong hands.

This disturbing story demonstrates how the web truly is devoid of morality. This is not to say it is good or evil, but like all tools, its destiny is determined by how it is used. In the case of Shirley Sherrod, not for good but for ... well you get the idea. But more than that, technology doesn't ask anything of us. It doesn't demand that we change or better ourselves. It exists simply because we wish it to. So really what we are left with is the task of determining how we can use technology but not let it rule over us.

This is where our tradition can come in to play. For one, Judaism emphasizes the importance of study and knowledge. The web is quite good at doling out information. If you can't remember the name of that book just Google it. But what the web is not so good for is contextualizing the information. Our tradition is all about context. If all we do is look at the superficial information, we will most likely miss out on what is really important. As Rabbi Meir

said, “Look not at the flask but at what is therein; there may be a new flask full of old wine, but in the old flask there may not even be any wine.”⁴

Our tradition also emphasizes the importance of being present in a community. When we gather together to pray be it during the High Holy Days or at a mincha service, the emphasis is placed on minyan, on having a number of people physically and hopefully spiritually gathered together. In our tradition there is no substitute for physical presence. I was at a shiva minyan recently where there were so many people that they ran out of books. No problem, I followed along on my phone which has a siddur app. A nifty app to say the least, but I was using technology as a tool to allow me to be there with the mourners.

And most importantly, our tradition emphasizes Shabbat, holy days, days of rest, days of sanctity. On these days we are reminded to turn off the outside world, and focus on the task at hand. This is increasingly important because as Mr. Powers argues in Hamlet’s Blackberry, “No matter how carefully you think about it or how assiduously you work on new approaches and habits, there’s no getting around the fact that we live in a very busy world. So busy that some days you inevitably wind up back in that hectic place where existence is all about tap-tap-tapping, and the very idea of escape feels quixotic.”⁵ So come join us for services, and don’t worry for your phone won’t work in here even if you forget to turn it off.

We live in an overwhelming world where it is tempting to say that Judaism has been passed by and has little to offer us. But this couldn’t be farther from the truth. There is strength in our traditions ability to help us navigate the seas of information constantly coming at us. All we have to do is be willing to pause, to listen, to study, and on occasion, log off so we can genuinely connect.

⁴ Pirke Avot 4:20

⁵ Ibid, 235.

In this coming year may God and our tradition help each of us to find a sense of balance in our lives. May we be able to hear above the constant noise surrounding us. And may we be able to find a sense of peace growing out of the chaos, where our hearts and minds truly are free to encounter the wonderful and the Holy in ourselves, in our surroundings, in our community, in our heritage, and in our God as well. For in that way, it truly could become a year of peace for each and every one of us. L'shana Tova