

Erev RH: The need to Unplug

In reviewing my deeds over the past years, I stand before you and confess that I have done something that I never thought I'd do. I stepped outside my comfort zone and summoned the courage to make a profound change in my life, knowing that once I went through with it, there would be no turning back. And despite my fears, my protests, and my stubborn resistance, I did it anyway. I got a smartphone.

Despite the incessant pleas of my children, and the teasing tones of friends and colleagues, I managed to hold out until about 8 months ago. I was perfectly content with my trusty, indestructible dumbphone. I used it to talk to people, period, and I liked it that way. I couldn't fathom why anyone would want to use a phone for any other purpose. But then my Nokia, which I was convinced would survive Armageddon, suddenly became unable to retrieve voicemail messages, and I knew the time had finally come to replace the only cellphone I had ever known.

When I walked into the Apple Store, and relinquished my phone to a twenty-something salesperson, he looked at it as if he had discovered an ancient artifact from the bronze age.

“Wow, is this a Nokia?” he asked in amazement. “I think my grandmother had one of these!”

Needless to say, I now know why many people claim that they can't live without their smartphones, because I'm now one of those people. I don't have to call Richard every hour that I'm away from home to ask him to check my email. I've got my entire life on I Cal. I have immediate access to everything I need to know and everyone I've ever known, and I've even learned to text! I can manage my life from the palm of my hand. In many ways, it's been a good thing. But you know what they say about too much of a good thing. Despite my best intentions, I've found myself becoming a bit too tethered to my new toy, and have been grateful that Shabbat has given me an enforced 25 hour separation from it.

So you can imagine my surprise when I came across an article last year entitled, “Some shuls encourage congregants to keep phones on during services.” In an “if you can't beat 'em, join 'em” strategy, Rabbi Amy Morrison encouraged her young adult Miami Beach congregation to text throughout the Rosh Hashanah service, where their responses to questions she posed around the themes of teshuvah were displayed on a large screen behind her.

The story was picked up by the NY times, which quoted Rabbi Morrison requesting the congregation to, “Take those phones out,” and asking, “What do you need to let go of...in order to be *‘fully present?’*”

My immediate answer would be, “YOUR CELL PHONE.” But, telling my judgmental self to be quiet, I continued reading. And I must admit, she makes a compelling case. Billed as “an experience” rather than a “service,” Rebecca Needler Dinar of “The Tribe,” the group that helped organize the service with the goal of engaging the mostly 20-30 something crowd, remarked, “They can interact with the Rabbi and they’ll drive the content of the service – they’ll see each other’s comments and react to them.” Jewish law aside, I can certainly see the merit in this. It gives congregants the opportunity to become active participants. As Rabbi Morrison put it, “texting will give you a voice in the service.” Needless to say, congregants gave the service a big “thumbs up,” using words like “refreshing,” “fun,” “honest” and “thought-provoking.”

I wonder if this idea will catch on, as not only the younger crowd, but all of us seem to rely more and more on electronic communication to speak for us.

Perhaps cellphones, which are so much a part of our secular lives, can actually help revitalize our spiritual lives as well. But at what price?

We have become a people who worship the golden cellphone. According to CNBC, “overall, we here in the US spend roughly 20% of our time on personal computers liking, tweeting, pinning, whatever it is we do on Tumblr and other stuff on social media, and *30% of our time on our mobile devices doing the same.*” CNN reports that “Americans ages 18-29 send and receive an average of 88 text messages per day, compared to 17 phone calls....even in the 65 and over group, daily texting still edges calling 4.7 to 3.8. In the TIME mobility poll, 32% of all respondents said they’d rather communicate by text than phone, even with people they know very well.”

Rabbi Morrison creatively capitalized on this information, allowing worshippers to keep the phones on for the specific purpose of enhancing the service. And it apparently worked. It’s becoming more and more apparent that once this technology becomes so embedded in our lives, it’s hard to imagine going even a day without it, even on Shabbat, a day when we are supposed to unplug from the outside world.

But is accommodating this addiction really the answer? Especially when, clearly, the problem is only getting worse.

Several years ago, the Jewish Week published a shocking story, reporting, "...the practice of texting on Shabbat is becoming increasingly prevalent, especially, but not exclusively, among Modern Orthodox teens...." Hold the phone!!! In the Orthodox world (and the Conservative as well), texting is strictly forbidden according to Halacha, Jewish law. The article continues, "The practice has become so widespread – some say half of Modern Orthodox teens text on Shabbat – that it has developed its own nomenclature – keeping 'half Shabbos,' for those who observe all the Shabbat regulations except for texting."

The fallout was widespread, as Rabbis voiced their concern. And not just concern about the fact that these kids were violating several commandments (namely, using electronics and writing on Shabbat). Indeed, Orthodox Rabbi Yossi Pollak commented, "Even if I did not believe texting to be halachically forbidden, I would still believe that texting violates the spirit of Shabbat."

The big question is, why are these Orthodox teens unable to let go of their phones on the holiest day of the week – and clearly, that is how they view Shabbat, as they remained Shomer Shabbat/Sabbath Observant, in every other way? Why disregard this particular commandment? And what would cause one of the students interviewed to boldly declare, “I know its breaking Shabbos. I don’t feel guilty.”

According to some of the Orthodox teens interviewed, they simply can’t (or perhaps don’t want to) stop texting. When that’s the primary mode they use to connect with each other during the week, disconnecting for 25 hours may seem like an eternity. A day school Rabbi, reflecting on his unsuccessful attempt to enforce a ban on cellphone usage during school hours, described the outcry he received from both students (“the amount of pain (one) student was in was literally unbearable,” he states), as well as their parents, who bore the brunt of that pain when the students came home. He mused, “If the students and their parents lose their equilibrium when a phone is taken away for a week, can such a child stop on Shabbos?”

The fact that they have willing and eager friends who text back seems, in their minds, to lesson the severity of the transgression.

If their Orthodox peers are doing it, it can't be that bad. To which I, channeling my mother's voice, would respond, "If all your friends jumped off a cliff would you follow them?"

I contend that our desire, our need to be perennially plugged-in, has given rise to a disease that is quickly becoming an epidemic: technological addiction. As we sit here today, taking a good hard look at ourselves, let's also take a good hard look at our cellphones, indeed, at all our electronic devices, and be honest about the role that they play in our lives. Take a moment to ask yourselves the following questions:

1. How often do you check your phone each day? Each hour?
2. Is checking your phone one of the first things you do when you wake up and one of the last things you do before going to bed?
3. Do you ever leave it at home? On purpose?
4. Do you feel anxious when you don't have it with you?
5. Do you ever talk or text when you're with someone else?

We might have justified purchasing our first cellphone by reasoning that we need to be reached, or we need access to a phone in case of emergencies, when we are away from our landlines. No question, that's important.

But I would venture to say that of all the ways in which we now use our cellphones today, using it as an actual *phone* is most likely near the bottom of our list.

We use our smartphones to check our email, check out music, check directions, check the score of the ballgame, check our schedules, check our flights, and check movie times. And while we're doing all this checking, we're not really, authentically, checking in with each other. And that's not a good thing.

Instead of talking to each other, we use our phones to text because it's faster, and it doesn't demand the investment of time or attention required when actually speaking to another person. We're more in control of our texts. We can craft and edit our words, we respond concisely and quickly, and we don't have to become invested in unpredictable dialogue. My children avoid speaking on the phone at all costs (unless it's with us, of course).

Hearing the human voice on the other end is just too personal, and conversations run the risk of becoming awkward, and lasting too long. Texting allows us to maintain a sense of detachment. We say what we have to say and are done with it. We can avoid emotional involvement. That's not a good thing either.

A few months ago, when I was in NY, I had Shabbat dinner with Jeremy at the apartment of one of his college friends who is now a Rabbinical Student at the JTS. There I was, sitting around the table with 5 other young adults, hearing them lament about the challenges of dating. One of them said something about how he was considering becoming more serious and taking his relationship to the next level. "Are you thinking about getting engaged?" I asked. He looked at me like I had two heads. "I'm thinking about moving from texting to talking on the phone," he responded. I almost choked on my challah.

Texting allows us to deliver bad news without having to witness the effect it has on others. We can avoid unpleasant confrontations and end a relationship via email or text message, or we can simply type the words "I'm sorry," without having to go through the shame of admitting we're wrong. We can avoid all the messiness and hard work and frustration and gratitude and satisfaction that can only be experienced through human contact. And we risk losing a bit of our own humanity in the process. And that's definitely not a good thing.

We can't listen to a text message. Real communication involves hearing the pain or joy in a person's voice, or, better yet, seeing it on their faces.

Real communication means being fully and completely present for another; being able to focus and listen and share each other's thoughts and hopes and concerns. In making it easy to maintain superficial, often artificial connections, cellphones, indeed technology in general, make it more difficult to form genuine, meaningful connections with each other.

Even when we are speaking to someone over the phone, the fact that the phone is mobile allows us to multitask, which compromises communication as well. I used to pride myself on the fact that I could get all my calls taken care of while folding laundry, kneading dough or doing the dishes. Until I realized that when the conversation ended, I had no idea what it had been about. Multitasking and listening do not go hand in hand.

MIT Professor Sherry Turkle, in her revealing book "Alone Together" reveals another downside to living in a techno-savvy world. She maintains, "Mobile technology has made each of us 'pauseable.'" Our face-to-face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages... turning away from those in front of you to answer a mobile phone or respond to a text has become close to the norm. A simple cell phone brings us into the world of continual partial attention." Not a good thing.

My kids can't understand why, during the rare times when we're all home together watching a movie, I get bent out of shape if they text their friends. I understand that this is just a part of their reality, and it's hard for me to explain why it bothers me so much. It might be a selfish request, but our time together is so precious and rare, that I don't want it being shared with anyone else, especially when they're not even in the room with us.

I cringe when I go to a restaurant and see families or friends texting on their phones instead of talking to each other. It makes me so sad to witness parents walking down the street holding a child with one hand, and talking on their phone with the other. Who knew that an object the size of an index card could potentially threaten the well-being and stability of the modern family.

I also wonder how much real life we are missing when we have a cellphone on us at all times. How can we notice anything around us or above us when we are constantly looking down at our mobile devices? And how can we ever think, thank, bless, or just zone out when we have a phone in our hands or earbuds in our ears?

Ms. Turkle ponders, “When is downtime, when is stillness? The text-driven world of rapid response does not make self reflection impossible but does little to cultivate it.” How can we have any peace when there’s never any quiet?

We can begin by loosening our grip on those phones. I’m not talking about hurling it into body of water a la Anne Hathaway in “The Devil Wears Prada.” I mean simply setting it aside. For one day a week. Or if that thought makes you break out into a cold sweat, try it just for one day. And what better day to begin than the Jewish New Year? Because with all due respect to Rabbi Morrison, I believe that cell phones have no place in a sanctuary, which should be a refuge from the outside world.

I respect the fact that she found a way to use technology in a spiritually beneficial way, but I wonder how many congregants, in the midst of texting answers specifically related to the service, yielded to temptation and also checked their email and chatted with each other? How many were able to resist the power of the “ping,” signaling that another important tidbit of information had come their way?

Would the service have been as effective if people had written their answers down on paper and then had them read aloud by the Rabbi, or was part of the interest factor enhanced by having their thoughts dramatically displayed on a large screen for everyone to see? In reporting on the service, writer Lizette Alvarez described how the white screen behind the Rabbi commanded the congregants to, “Pray. Write. Text.” She goes on to say, “And text they did for nearly 90 minutes.” I imagine that all that writing and texting inevitably took some time away from actually praying.

So I’ll pose the same question to you that Rabbi Morrison posed to her congregation: “What do you need to let go of...in order to be ***‘fully present?’***” And I’ll stand by my original answer. We need to let go of our cellphones. To me, shul time means shared time with real human beings. Our tradition puts such a premium on community, and creating sacred space for that community to come together. We need a place that allows us to tune out the outside world, and all the technology inherent in it, and tune in to each other. For the sake of our sanity, we need our sanctuary to be our technology-free safe haven so that we can reconnect with one another, with ourselves, and with God.

On Rosh Hashanah, as we look at how we can lead more meaningful lives, and engage in more meaningful relationships, we can begin with a simple action: we can pull the plug, and break free from the hold that technology has over us, even if it's only for one day. Perhaps that one day will become one day a week, and then perhaps an hour of each day. Being connected to the world is important. Believe me, I'm not trading in my iphone anytime soon. But we need to become more mindful about how we use technology to enhance our lives without compromising our connection to each other. Achieving that balance would be a really good thing. And who says you can't have too much of a good thing?

Amen