

## Erev Rosh Hashanah 5773: Texting Aaron

My younger son, Hillel, has a new toy. It's a digital camera designed for children; it has huge side grips for little hands and a thick, plastic case to protect it from the tumbles it will surely endure in his care. As I watched him play happily in his new electronic wonderland, my mind flashed back to my own first forays in photography. For me, it was a pinhole camera kit that we picked up at a children's science museum—essentially a cardboard box, a flap to cover the hole, and some photographic paper. You sat it down on a stable surface, removed the flap for a minute, covered it back up and that was it. Hillel's camera, of course, is far more sophisticated. With a memory card added, he can take thousands of photos and make dozens of videos. And his favorite feature is that the lens pivots and can face the user. So he can create video after video of himself -- singing or talking or walking around the house.

It is developmentally appropriate, mind you, for a preschooler to be the center of his own universe; but watching him I thought about how recording himself at age three is preparing him for the next stage of digital life – to be able to broadcast himself to the world through whatever social networking system might be the newest, greatest thing some years down the road.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for turning the lens on ourselves, for sure. The purpose though, is not to record, broadcast or curate ourselves for a host of virtual friends, but to see our lives more clearly, to scrutinize our relationships, and to ask where we stand in living our ideals and values. Self-examination during the High Holy Days leads us to seek forgiveness so that we can repair our relationship to ourselves, our family, friends, community, and to God. Through this process, *teshuvah*, we seek to live with greater self-awareness and honesty, and to connect more fully and authentically with those near to us.

In her recent book, *Alone Together*, Professor Sherry Turkle, Director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and the Self, explores the intersection of technology and social life. She describes ways in which our new technological tools and toys are remaking how we relate to one another and to ourselves -- what we expect from one another and what we are willing to give to one another. This evening I want to speak briefly about Professor Turkle's work, its implications for the crucial task of *teshuvah*—and then remind us of Judaism's call to be present for one another in real, not virtual, time and space.

Professor Turkle begins her exploration by comparing two seemingly unrelated phenomena. First, there is Zhu-Zhu. Zhu-Zhu is a robotic pet hamster that was all the rage of 2009-2010's toy season; it was advertised as "living to feel the love." The company tells you that Zhu-Zhus are loveable and responsive, never make a mess, and are guaranteed to not die. Second comes Chatroulette—a new website with one and a half million users across the globe. When I checked it out this past summer, there were 35,639 other users on the site at the same time I was. By clicking your mouse, you spin the virtual wheel and are connected randomly via live video to another user somewhere in the world. You can chat or write notes to one another. Research shows that people usually click "Next" to get a new partner after only two seconds. As Turkle writes, "... Zhu-Zhu is designed to be loved; in Chatroulette people are objectified and quickly discarded... we seem determined to give human qualities to objects, and content to treat each other as things."

How far this goes is chillingly represented in the story Professor Turkle recounts of Miriam and Paro. Miriam is a resident in a skilled care facility—lonely and vulnerable after conflict with her son who has moved across the country—and Paro is a few steps up from toys like Zhu Zhu. Paro, and other "sociable robots" like it, are being aggressively marketed to seniors as companions. Paro's robotic body is in the form of a cute baby seal, and it is programmed to respond with eye contact, purring, nuzzling, and other gestures when touched and spoken to. It has a small English vocabulary and can sense the "state of mind" of the owner—responding differently if she is touched aggressively than she does if the touch is gentle. Turkle tells us that as Miriam recounts her sadness, she turns to Paro, and tells the robot (or perhaps herself) that all will be all right. She strokes Paro, and it responds with increasing "affection." As Turkle notes, this kind of interaction between two people can be profoundly therapeutic and healing:

We can heal ourselves by giving to others what we most need... How do we understand what happens when this interaction is between a human and a robot? In the moment of apparent connection between Miriam and her Paro, a moment that comforted her, the robot understood nothing. Miriam experienced an intimacy with another, but she was in fact alone.

A theme that arises throughout Turkle's research is "the general fatigue of the messiness with humans and human interactions" —and this is the idea that links the ever-patient and responsive Paro to the frenzied click-click-click of Chatroulette. Chatroulette seems to offer instant connection with no commitment—without any vulnerability. And just as Paro is a step beyond Zhu Zhu, so Chatroulette proceeds

logically from the kinds of social networking sites that many of us already use. We have already learned to tailor our online profiles to design, curate and project any version of ourselves that we care to create. We are accustomed to clicking boxes to select who is in our online circle of friends, and to filter who sees which parts of our online selves. Through social networking, we can broadcast to others without really letting others in—staying connected without giving any more than we would like, or feeling that we are having too much demanded of us.

Now, the positives of our on-line social networks are well known—reuniting with folks from our past, staying abreast of the day to day lives of family members even when geographically distant, being able to efficiently get the word out to hundreds about an event or to plan in-person meetings or flash mobs on the ground. But the other side of social networking is the tantalizing promise of technology that offers a combination of the appearance of openness combined with protection and control. As Turkle writes, “networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.” She concludes, “We’d rather text than talk.”

What is more, because Wi-Fi and cell phone technology now allow us to check our e-mail and status updates from nearly everywhere, there is profound anxiety about not being connected. How else can we explain opposition to laws regarding texting and driving? Many seem to want connectivity at the risk of their lives—and ours.

We have been sold, too, on the idea that Internet connectivity everywhere will ultimately save us time, but research does not bear that out. In the month of May alone Americans spent 53 billion minutes on Facebook. And the more time we spend online, the less time we have for family and friends. Ask yourself: How many times this past year have you chosen online activity in the evening or other times, rather than time with those close to you? Turkle concludes: “Overwhelmed by the volume and velocity of our lives, we turn to technology to help us find time. But technology makes us busier than ever and more in search of retreat. Gradually we come to see our online life as life itself.”

Each Rosh Hashanah, we are called on to do *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, an accounting of our souls: an accounting of the lives we’ve lived, the choices we’ve made, the state of our relationships with others. This year, more than ever, I am challenging myself—and invite you—to do this accounting in very concrete terms. Perhaps I should call it not *cheshbon haNefesh* but *cheshbon (accounting) haInternet*.

How much time have I spent online, and what has it stopped me from doing in person? How have I relied on social media to connect with people versus making time

for true face-to-face meeting? When I'm with others, where is my attention? Is it with the people I'm with? Or do I feel compelled to check-in elsewhere on my smartphone, with work, with e-mails, with the latest text message from a friend?

The challenge of every seductive new technology is this: how do we use it to enhance our lives, rather than letting it take over our lives?

In Torah, God calls out to our patriarchs, and to Moses, and they answer “Hineyni” — behold, I am here. In the book of Isaiah, God says to the people Israel, to us, “Hineyni” —here I am for you, ready to comfort and renew my people. Now imagine for a moment Moses, at the burning bush: God calls out to him, and before responding, Moses says, “Just a sec, I've got to text Aaron. This is really cool!”

Judaism is a religion which continually asserts the power of presence. We make God manifest in the world by being present for one another, by truly paying attention. The philosopher Martin Buber saw divinity reveal itself in the mutuality of two people meeting, encountering each other fully, neither one objectifying or using the other. Torah recounts that God instructed the Israelites to build an ark with two figures on the top facing each other. And it is from this place—the place where we face one another fully—that the divine presence will make itself known.

Vulnerability is not the enemy; our vulnerability is part of our humanity. Indeed, it is that very vulnerability that often calls us to each other, that causes us to reach out and respond to one another. And in being there for each other, we bring God into the world.

A young friend of ours lost her husband to cancer earlier this year. From the time he was diagnosed, she began blogging about her thoughts and experiences. When she wrote of his death, one of her friends wrote back: “I think I am better with words in person, but over the internet today I will say that I am so sorry...” The friend was reaching out online as best she could, using that medium to provide an instant response. And then her message continued, “More words will come face to face, over meals, under clouds...” When we think about when we have comforted one another and when we have felt most comforted, I am guessing that most of us would say it was in the presence—the full, attentive presence—of another person.

This year may we re-commit ourselves to paying full attention to one another. Let us consider reallocating some of our time from virtual worlds to this one. May we make a difference in each others' lives in real time. May we live lives abundant in meaning,

aware of our inter-connection, rejoicing in the power we have—simply by being present for one another—to bring God into the world.

L'shanah tovah.