

Rosh Hashanah
Har Shalom
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I want to tell you about a dream I had. Not a dream that you have when you're asleep, but a childhood dream: to spend Yom Haatzmaut, Independence Day, in Israel. I finally had the privilege of experiencing it last May, when I was at the tail end of my rabbinical school year in Israel. I traveled from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv for this pinnacle moment, celebrating the 71st birthday of Israel. I was standing on the sunny beach with swarms of families, listening to blaring, upbeat Israeli music while waiting for the famous MATAS, the special Israeli Air Force Show that my Israeli friends had told me about over the years. Suddenly, four slim fighter jets packed in tight formation zipped past. They zoomed up and down, spiraling and weaving, shooting straight out of a nose-dive a mere 50 feet above the blue Mediterranean waters. One amazing stunt another, a true expression of military prowess.

Then out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something that broke my trance. I saw a small, wide-eyed child reaching up and pointing, trying to express his wonderment to his father. But the dad didn't smile and pick his child up and put him on his shoulders to share the moment. He didn't even react. Because he was taking a video of the planes on his cell phone. Now, I don't mean to chastise this particular father for focusing more on his phone than his kid. We've all missed potential shared moments by participating in life through a screen. And yet, we've all been that eager child reaching up, trying to connect...and losing the battle to a smartphone.

I saw an article online last week that alerted me to this reality. It was about a photographer named Eric Pickersgill who did a photographic exposé about people just like us and their cell phones. He photographed a woman laying in her partner's lap, three brothers squished on a couch, women standing near a bar, fraternity brothers grilling. But before he captured each shot--and this is the interesting part--he had the subjects freeze and he removed the

devices from each person's hand. The resulting pictures are eerie. Eyes cast away from each other. Scowls. Blank, staring faces. Young children and grandparents ignored. A couple not snuggled up in bed, but rather back to back looking down at their empty palms. Pickersgill's eye-opening work illustrates: With cell phones, are both together and alone.

Our Torah teaches us a universal truth--about the very first human it says לא טוב לאדם להיות לבדו. It isn't good for humans to be alone. Cell phones can be very helpful for connecting to other, but at the same time they can also draw us into our own worlds so that we are **indeed**

alone at a party full of people

alone in a crowded metro-car

alone at the dinner table.

When our relationships suffer, we suffer. In fact, loneliness trigger ours brains the SAME WAY that stubbing your toe does. We feel literal pain. That means when we spend too much time connecting to Facebook instead of connecting face-to-face, when we reject each other by checking our phone, when we are alone together IT HURTS.

Here's another place where I personally struggle with phones: Cell phones fill idle time. It can be hard for me to just sit, especially when I feel anxious or stressed--it's *much* easier to pick up my phone and push away those feelings instead of using other coping skills. Instead of calling on a friend, I find myself scrolling on Instagram. Then I end up comparing myself to other people's cute, curated images and feel worse. Like I am missing out or even failing in some way.

Now I am absolutely not advocating for the abandonment of smartphones. They have improved our lives in many ways by consolidating our email, calendars, address books, notepads, GPS--I could go on--all into one amazing device. FaceTime has made it easy to see the

faces of our loved ones who live far away and to easily share information with others. I know-- my parents live in Texas, my sister in San Francisco, my fiance in Long Island and I live in Manhattan! All of this makes the smartphone an important, effective tool. But you know what is also an effective tool? A Hammer. But hammering a nail too long will make a hole in the wall. And so too, when we overuse our devices, we end up doing more harm than good.

So why do we keep picking up our phones an average of **34 times a day**? Two reasons:

1. Every time our cell phone pings, our neurological reward systems are primed to respond. Our brains just love sounds and colors--especially when it means we “have likes,” so to speak, and are well-connected.

Which brings me to the second reason we pick up our phones more than is helpful to us:

2. At some level the phone is fulfilling a human need, after all we are wired to connect with each other. But our phones are not able to satisfy this primal need to be with other humans, just like a bag of chips is not able to satisfy you after missing lunch.

This issue doesn't only affect us, but also impacts our children and teens. I heard a story about Siri was once activated during a Hebrew school class that was discussing God. When the teacher asked her students, “What is your relationship with God?” Siri replied, “I don't know anything about that!” It's funny, but it also reminds us that while phones and tablets can be great for managing kids temporarily, these devices will *always* fail to instill the values and habits that we dream our kids will grow up to have.

These kids and teens watch us closely:

- If they see our phones out at dinner, they will have theirs out, too.

- If they hear us comparing ourselves to someone on social media, they will compare themselves, too.

People say to me all the time that “Kids these days never get out and play, all they do is sit around on their phones.” Or, “Teens don’t interact with each other in person anymore, they are all snapchatting just each other from across the table.” But if we are honest with ourselves, we are also guilty as charged.

The example we set isn’t the end of it. I know as an educator that you have to be really in tune with kids and teens, and that a lot of what they communicate isn’t said. **If our heads are down in our devices**, we can miss those crucial moments to notice when a young person we love is struggling. **If our heads are down in our device**, we can send the message that we don’t care in the first place.

In my experience, I’ve also found that these kids can actively inspire us to change our habits. One of my USYers on a summer program told our group about an app called Moment, which helps you track your social media usage. She told everyone how she’s trying to be more aware of time spent on her phone because she noticed that it was negatively impacting her mood and her friendships.

This young woman shared with us the same imperative wisdom that Psychology Today journalist Sam Kean urges us to consider. He writes that to function optimally, “we have to find islands of time during which we can unplug.”

Islands of time daily. Islands of time weekly.

And this is where my journey of my relationship with my iPhone and my relationship with Judaism converge. I started keeping shabbat about two years ago when I started rabbinical

school. I don't mean to sound evangelistic but it seriously changed my life. Shabbat transforms a dinner table from people on their phones, to people connecting with love and laughter.

My friends ask me how I can possibly stop using my phone on Shabbat. They'll say, "I could never do that, I don't have that kind of will power." But, honestly, it's my favorite part of Shabbat. For example, I can sit in a park and watch children play, and feel my heart filling with joy, rather than snapping a picture of it that I will never look at and moving on.

During my Israel year, I wasn't able to talk to my family during shabbat, but I gained friendships that did feel like family because of the time we spent and the way we looked out for each other on Shabbat. One Shabbat in Jerusalem, I noticed my classmate hanging around after shul, so I approached him and asked what his plans were for the evening. It turned out that he had not yet been invited for dinner. He joined my meal and ended up having a great time with us. But I probably wouldn't have noticed him if I had been on my phone looking up directions or texting so and so about whether to bring hummus or baba ganoush. All of that had been done ahead of time, and therefore I was able to be present to the needs of my friend.

I mentioned earlier that I often turn to my phone when I'm anxious to distract me, but Shabbat has helped me with this. Even though sitting idly on a slow Shabbat was pretty excruciating at first, now, for the first time in my life, I am able to tolerate sitting quietly with myself. But don't take it from me, take it from someone much holier. A person of great spiritual wisdom. THE POPE. Pope Francis says, "What the Jews followed and still observe was to consider the Sabbath holy. On Saturday you rest. One day a week. Out of gratitude, to worship God, to spend time with family, to play. We are not machines."

Today is Rosh Hashana, a day when we wake up, open our spiritual toolkit and identify what isn't working. To act differently next time we confront a challenge that we've failed at

repeatedly. To change our actions for a more sustainable life and future. If you are like me and the average American, your cell phone usage probably isn't working in your best interest. We need to do teshuva as a society.

Today, ask yourself:

- What would it be like to delay looking at a text message the next time I'm with a friend?
- What would it be like to make eye contact and smile at someone next time I'm in a waiting room instead of pulling out Candy Crush?
- What would it be like to spend Shabbat unplugged--whether it's for Friday night, Shabbat afternoon or the whole 25 hours?

I would love to hear from you on Yom Kippur or on one of my future visits. No seriously, try it and come tell me how it went.

- Let's make this the year when we stay aware of our phone usage.
- Let's make this the year when we find islands of time for ourselves and each other.
- Let's make this the year that we notice the child's hand reaching out and take it.
- Let's make this the year when we hear Shabbat whisper, "Let's not be alone together when we can just be together."

You might not think we can be like Moses who, as we read in the Torah, meets God face-to-face on Mount Sinai. But we *can* meet God face-to-face. Here, in this very room. In the faces of our families, in the faces of our friends, in the faces of people we don't know yet. In the New Year, let's meet God in each other. In real life.

Shana tova.

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Sam Kean's article is from *Psychology Today*, April 2018, p. 81

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