

What's in Your Pocket?

Rabbi Nicole Roberts

NSTE, Yom Kippur Morning 5783/2022

Over my recent holiday in the States, I became aware of a new phenomenon in air travel: most passengers now leave their cabin window shade *down*, for the *entire* flight. Even at takeoff and landing, when everyone *used to* love watching the land slowly disappear or come into view—a view that always brings a tear, and that none of us have seen for almost 3 years, the shades remained closed! Finally, it occurred to me that passengers were leaving them closed so they could better see the screen they were watching, whether on the seatback in front of them or on the device they'd brought from home in their pocket. After landing in Washington, I noticed something similar: my nieces and nephew—two teens and a “tween”—preferred to sit in a dim room, rather than being outside in the warm summer light. Why? Because it's hard to see the screen of a phone or tablet when there's *light* in the way. Screened devices have won the day, I thought; they've conquered the daylight into submission.

There were times that I too gave in to the lure of the screen, like when I had Covid and took a deep dive into the dazzling array of shows on Netflix and other “on demand” platforms. I watched one about American high school students reacting to a school shooting, and another about LGBTQ issues facing teenagers. In both shows, so much of what went on in the teenage mind and heart was expressed not in words *spoken* to each other, but in text messages on their phones. So the shows were often silent, with little dialogue—just music playing and text messages flashing across the movie screen. This cleverly depicted the way teens communicate today, but I question whether it modelled the best way for adolescents to process pain or work out differences of opinion; to confess their love, resolve hurt feelings, or cry out for help. For me, it highlighted a dearth of dialogue in a world that is, ironically, flooded with communication devices. Sound bytes, tweets, and facebook comments are not dialogue; they're *broadcasts*. A text message on the phone is a good way to check in or say “hi,” but it lacks the nuance that broadens our horizons, the richness that helps us understand other perspectives and develop deeper *relationships*.

Is there even common *content* today that we can all dialogue *about*? Each seat on the plane had its own individual screen with a thousand movies and shows to choose from. My nephew and nieces were each watching a different sporting event on their own *personal* device. This diminishing of common experience, the dearth of dialogue, the disinterest in the awesomeness of the world around us... these concern me. Because they suggest that while we may think we're more “connected” than ever before, we're actually more insulated—insulated from the types of interactions that grow our character, expand our perspective, and help us see beyond our own personal preferences. I worry that technology has made possible the sort of self-curated life that makes for self-centred societies, leaders, and governments, and that the electronic devices we each carry in our pockets may be part of the problem.

Retired US Senator Paul Ryan spoke at my nephew's high school graduation in June about just this. He said we live in “a time where the whole world” is “literally connected to you by a device in your pocket,” our mobile phones. The whole world! The worldwide web! Any piece of knowledge we might ever need to find! Right there, in our *pocket*! No need to look any further, or talk to anyone around us, in order to get what we need or be entertained. As a result, he said, “it's easy for us to withdraw into tech... live more of our lives online... [and] flock to our echo chambers of conformity.” In such a world, he charged his teenage (and adult!) listeners, “empathy...is something you're going to have to work harder... to maintain.” Ryan cautioned that handheld

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technology has brought us to [quote] “an amazing inflection point in human history.” Just where this turning point might lead, he left uncertain.

I’m not a luddite, and anyone who’s talked to me lately knows how completely and oddly *smitten* I am with my new iPhone 13 Mini, which fits so nicely in my pocket. But I find myself in agreement with Ryan about the impact of our devices on our relationship to the world around us. I, too, worry that human empathy is in decline, and with it, human relationship, broader horizons, and our ability to work through our differences. Because I can’t help feeling that there is a connection between these trends and the polarisation of society, the paralysis of governments, even the narcissistic behaviours we’ve seen in leaders around the globe. I don’t propose, of course, that we banish the mobile phone or other devices from our life. But I do want to raise a red flag about the extreme to which the electronic digital, and information age has enabled us to personalise and narrow our realm of experience. Because a world that revolves around the *individualised* experience, which puts self at centre, stands in stark contrast to the type of world our Jewish sages believed could endure.

To our sages, the world stood on three things—*al shloshe d’varim*—on *Torah* (Jewish learning), on *Avodah* (Jewish worship), and on *G’milut Chasadim* (bestowing kindness on others).ⁱ These, they saw as the cornerstones of a healthy civilisation. If this sounds reductionist, it is, because to them, each of these words meant so much more; they were symbols of a way of life. By *Torah*, they meant not just words of Scripture, but the *ways* Jews study it: through *machloket*—fruitful debate and discussion, over a common text. Through deep and sometimes tense conversations, our sages made sense of the world around them by hearing and thoughtfully responding to *other people’s opinions*. In a *yeshivah*, people study in pairs called *chavruta*, where one study partner bounces ideas off another whose interpretation of a law, practice, or belief may differ. This ancient Jewish mode of learning was designed to reveal deeper truths for having been *pushed* by another human being. Through such engagement, we learn to argue our point in a way that is respectful—a far cry from the hostility and debasement one often finds in an online forum. One’s opinion in a Jewish forum, like that in our own weekly Torah Study group, is meant to be generative, not definitive, generating the conversations and *shakla v’tara*—the give and take—that our sages considered the foundation of a civilized society.

By *Avodah*, the second cornerstone, the sages didn’t just mean reciting words of worship or expressing the personal longings of our heart, but doing this in *community*. The presence of community helps keep us from becoming *consumed* by our own individualised interests. The *minyan*—a group of at least ten—comes together regularly to sing *God’s* praises, to concede that none of *us* is all powerful and all knowing, and to become aware of the magnificence of the world around us: the rooster that awakens us,ⁱⁱ the mountains that attest to God’s majesty,ⁱⁱⁱ the moon that begins each new Hebrew month,^{iv} and light—*light!* Every morning, we are to praise the Creator of heavenly light!^v God wants us to open the shade and look beyond the back of the seat in front of us, beyond what we ourselves have curated! Beyond the personalised playlist and on demand movie! Characterising Jewish prayer, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “the focus of prayer is not the self.” Prayer, he says, is “a complete turning of the heart toward God... the momentary... absence of self-centered thoughts.” Prayer helps us ward off narcissism, as Heschel writes, “The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel.”^{vi} *Avodah* cultivates an outward focus, beyond the self

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and our own powers, beyond what we can know by pressing a button. It orients us toward a Mystery we may *never* fully grasp.

And what did the rabbis see in *g'milut chasadim*—bestowing kindness on others—that made this their third cornerstone of a civilised world? They saw *self-sacrifice* for the benefit of another person. *G'milut chasadim* is *selfless* giving and selfless doing. It helps us develop empathy for the needs, longings, and life experience of another, a prerequisite for doing a kindness for that person. Humility and empathy were especially vital to good leadership, the sages believed. When these traits are lacking, we end up with dictators who would rather sit in their own echo chambers than admit there are needs they are not meeting, ideas they are not considering, and crises they are not addressing. *G'milut chasadim* makes for a more compassionate society.

Al shloshe d'varim ha'olam omed—"The world endures because of these three things," the sages say in the Mishnah. *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *G'milut Chasadim* each make us turn outward. None of these insulate or amplify the self; rather, they pull us out of ourselves and our echo chambers. How far contemporary society has strayed from the priority our sages placed on opening ourselves up to other opinions, appreciating the world around us, and cultivating empathy. Our mobile phones and other devices are not solely to blame for this, of course, and there are countless blessings and saving graces of the electronic and information age. So the question is simply: How might we counter some of their *ill* effects, turn outward, "inflect" human history in a healthy direction, and ensure the world endures?

There was once a Hasidic rebbe named Simcha Bunim who, like us, lived at "an amazing inflection point in human history": Poland in the 1800s—an age transformed by the Enlightenment and rationalist thought, which posed serious challenges to the ideals of the rabbis who had lived before him. But Reb Bunim knew that there was no going back in time, and that the Enlightenment had brought about much positive change in addition to its dangers. So he didn't propose banishing aspects of modernity from our lives or secluding ourselves from this new world. Instead, he preached a sort of spiritual balance and self monitoring. In a beloved teaching, he said we should each carry two stones: in one pocket a stone etched with the words "I am but dust and ashes," and in the other pocket, a stone etched with the words "The whole world was created just | for *me*." Should we find ourselves feeling a bit too lowly, humble, or powerless, we are to pull out the stone that reminds us we are the *crown* of God's creation. The seas, the land, the wildlife...all were created before humanity, preparing for our grand arrival—setting the table for our human banquet. Yet should we find we're growing a bit too full of ourselves, self consumed, or powerful—we are to pull out the stone that reminds us we are made of mere dust, and to dust we shall return; the stone that reminds us we are mortal, fallible, and limited—part of and subservient to Something greater.

In reflecting on Reb Bunim's teaching during my travels, I couldn't help thinking of my own pockets and what *I* never leave home without. In one pocket: This. My phone, which puts the *whole world* at my fingertips—the world I shape to fit my preferences: what news I take in, who I "friend" on Facebook, who I call and when... this symbol of my individualised interests. But in the other pocket: This. My face mask, which for the past two years has been whispering a vital reminder for our age: that we are "but dust and ash." We are mere mortals, who don't have as much control as we think, and whose personal preferences are not the be all and end all. Whenever I reach for the mask in my pocket, I cover part of my own face, give up a bit of my own comfort, for our

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collective wellbeing. The mask symbolises self-sacrifice for the sake of society—living *together*—a reminder that we are a spoke and not the hub of the universe. The mask reminds us of the limits of our own power and knowledge and, by allowing us to convene, reminds us that life is far richer when there's a give and take with other people. It reminds us that no matter how great our technology, or how easy our access to information, our world is *diminished* when we live in isolation and dwell in echo chambers.

God willing, the day will come when we need not carry a mask in our pocket everywhere we go. But when that day comes, how else might we maintain our spiritual balance and counter the impact of what remains in our other pocket? Perhaps, we could simply take our phone from that pocket, open its calendar app, and enter in some diary dates. Diary dates for Torah study conversations, Book and Film Group discussions; dates for communal prayer services, or singing with our Choir; dates for volunteering on our Garden team, or with our Social Action group—all these activities help us turn outward, lift the shade, and let the light in. They bring us into dialogue with people who see the world differently, and teach us how to respectfully disagree. They give us common content that we ourselves did not shape, choose, design, or broadcast. They cultivate empathy and compassion, and perhaps by extension, responsive and responsible leadership. Our sages would say they even safeguard civilisation itself.

Torah, Avodah, and G'milut Chasadim—these values of our sages can become constant companions that shape us, if we make them part of our lives and practice in the new Jewish year. So book in. Come along. And engage with the world around you, right here, once a week, once a month... make the commitment. Make it a practice. If it changes you, it may just change our society and help our world endure. Our sages believed that inflecting the world in a good and enduring direction was in our hands. *Lo niflayt hi mim'cha*, affirms today's Torah reading: "It is not beyond your grasp!" *V'lo r'chokah hi*—"It is not far from you at all." *Ki karov elecha*—"it is very near to you"—*b'ficha uvil'vav'cha la'asoto*—"in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it."^{vii} We've got this. We've had it for centuries. It's in our mouths. It's in our pockets. It's in our very hands. *G'mar chatimah tovah.*

- ⁱ *Mishnah Pirke Avot 1:2*
- ⁱⁱ *Nisim b'chol yom, morning liturgy*
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Liturgy for Kabbalat Shabbat*
- ^{iv} *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 41b-42a, Birkat HaLevana*
- ^v *Morning liturgy, Yotzer Or*
- ^{vi} Heschel - <https://opensiddur.org/miscellanea/pedagogy/prayer-by-abraham-joshua-heschel-1945/>
- ^{vii} *Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning in Machzor Mishkan T'shuvah*