

Synagogue and the Quest for a Deeper Humanity

Yom Kippur Morning 5780

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It was a sunny Sunday afternoon at “Beit Roberts,” as David and I welcomed two NSTE families into our home for lunch after Hebrew School. There were four children scurrying around, the eldest two about age 7, and—a sign of the times, perhaps—both named Ella. We adults were suffering from the late afternoon, post-lunch lethargy in the dining room, so we grew a little less watchful over the raucous behaviour by the two Ellas and their younger siblings in the living room. Sofas were denuded of their cushions, beverage coasters strewn about the floor, and a nerf ball bounced around from child to child—literally, bouncing off their bodies, which they all found hilarious. Until, of course, someone got hurt. Then, things got more serious.

We all noticed that one of the Ellas was sobbing, holding a hand over one eye. The adults quickly jumped to attention, while the other kids looked on quietly with concern. It turns out the other Ella had thrown the ball a little too hard, targeting the first Ella’s face with a little too much precision, thinking it might be funny if the ball bounced off her head. When she realised it wasn’t, and that the other Ella was hurt and crying, her own face grew troubled. Her brow furrowed, until soon she, too, broke into tears. “I’m really sorry,” she cried, looking horrified and panicked at her friend’s pain, and she ran over to put a hand on her shoulder. She couldn’t bear that she had made someone cry and hurt. So the two cried in unison for a few tragic moments, until the injured Ella saw that her injurer felt so badly. Suddenly, her sobs slowed, and slowly the drama transformed into friendly, quieter play. No lasting damage, to body or friendship. All was forgiven.

To achieve this outcome, we adults had run only marginal interference, offering only a stern word, a comforting hug, and a gentle reminder about throwing things indoors. But really, the girls had done the hardest work themselves, dancing the intricate steps of empathy, remorse, apology, forgiveness, recovery, and redemption—all within a matter of minutes. It was extraordinary.

In fact, this sort of scene is becoming all too extraordinary in this day and age, say the experts. For one thing, more and more, our children *don’t face each other* when they play together; often they face the same direction as each other, toward a screen. But regardless of orientation, when one of them hurts or offends the other, the intricate steps of the apology dance do not transpire. While kids the Ellas’ age still have to work things out and dance the dance, kids only slightly older—and we adults too—are more and more resorting to a shallower form of *teshuvah*: we simply type “I’m sorry” on our phones or computers, and click “send.” Author and MIT professor of social science, Sherry Turkle, warns that this form of apology lacks all the elements that have traditionally served to deepen and grow us as human beings, to deepen our character and deepen our relationships. She describes these elements as: “looking you in the eye, seeing that you are hurt, your seeing that I’m upset that I see you are hurt, you feeling compassionate because you see that I’m upset, my seeing that you look compassionate

so maybe there's a chance for me, your seeing that I want to take that chance..." This is the anatomy of an apology, and it's a full body workout. Typing "I'm sorry" and hitting send, Turkle says, "does none of this work."

Modern communications technology, of course, is the enabler of the shallow sort of apology, along with a related phenomenon, which I only recently learned has a name: "ghosting." Ghosting is a modern, technology-enabled way of ending a relationship or friendship. It's [quote] "the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly, and without explanation, withdrawing from all communication" with them. Now, while it's hard to do that with someone who lives in your home, evidently university students and adults ghost each other all the time—by simply not responding to emails, text messages, or calls, and using the electronic features of their phones and computers to block them. So instead of having the difficult conversation about why one wants out of the relationship, there is a merciless, radio silence. The other person is just supposed to eventually "get the idea."

Like the email apology, ghosting gets us off the hook in a non-confrontational, non-interactive way. But that way lacks all the complex conversational elements that make us into deeper human beings, who have up-close encounters with hurt and pain, compassion and empathy—who look someone else's sadness in the eye, and bear their disappointment on our shoulders. Gone are the days when we drum up the inner courage to spit out the difficult truths that need to be said and put thoughtfulness into how to say them gently, with an eye toward preserving the relationship in some other form. "It's not you, it's me." "You have so much going for you, but we're just not a fit." "I just don't think of you that way." Or "I'd still like to be friends, but just friends." Even saying platitudes face to face is more character building than giving someone the electronic "cold shoulder." It also builds the character of the person we're talking to, who has to recover in our presence and summon words in response. Then, as we watch them coping, mustering a smile, and trying to forgive, we learn something about human resilience and grace, our admiration grows, and a friendship is preserved. The back and forth of face to face conversation is an intricate dance, and we're forgetting how to do it. Important muscles are atrophying—the very muscles that distinguish us as human beings, from animals, plants, and unfeeling objects. We're growing "shallowed," a verb coined by my mentor, Rabbi Larry Hoffman.

Communications technology, ironically, is "shallowing" our conversations, and in turn, our relationships, and our character. Technology has served humanity, but diminished our humanness. We're becoming shallower people. A 2010 studyⁱ showed a 40% drop in empathy indicators among university students, meaning they are not as empathetic as their counterparts of the 1980s and 90s. We are losing the ability to put ourselves in another's shoes and imagine what they might be feeling, how they might be suffering. What frightening implications for the practice of professions like medicine, or journalism, or education, or even politics... A 'tweet' does not a town hall meeting make. Other research has shown that our one-to-one conversations turn to more trivial matters the minute someone pulls out their mobile phone—even if they just place it *face down* on the table! Because who wants to go deep if you're just going to be interrupted?

Or if you feel another's attention is divided, or somewhere else entirely? Deep connection and understanding are becoming a thing of the past.

Professor Turkle—the woman who described the apology dance—has written a book called *Reclaiming Conversation*, in which she proposes a remedy for the problem of our “shallowing.” Her remedy is simple: “Look up, look at each other, and start the conversation.” She calls it “the talking cure.” Conversation is the key to a deeper humanity, that feels empathy, that knows how to bring comfort to another person, that can recover from insult and salvage a friendship... Conversation is how we learn the intricate dance that deepens us. It's how we practice that dance, and *practice makes person*.

Real conversations are the key to our deepening. I think we know this, yet somewhere along the way, we got the technology wrong. We've built an astonishing *electronic* communications infrastructure, which puts us into contact with each other more frequently, less expensively, and from farther away than ever before. This has worked undeniably well for *transactional* exchange. But it has diminished depth and dynamism in the *human* exchange. So that begs the question: *What is the right technology for producing a deeper humanity?* How do we raise the next generation to dance the dance that deepens them—to look up, look at each other, and start the conversation? How do we retrain ourselves to do the same?

Well, call me a rabbi, but I believe the synagogue is that technology—the technology that brings us into conversation, deepens the human experience, and can save us from a shallowed existence. Rabbi Danny Zemel speaks of synagogues as “communities of profundity”—because they are places where we come together to think, talk, interact, and even argue, in ways that enhance and advance the human project. They are where we take a deep dive into discussing matters of ultimacy: our mortality and the preciousness of life, why we're here in the first place, whether God exists, how to share our space and time on this planet with God's other creations... In synagogue, we encounter deep questions alongside and in conversation with people who see the world from different angles than our own, confronting ideas that bother us, inspire us, liberate us, and move us to action. Whether in sermons or at the study table debating a text; in our discussion groups, book club, kibbutzing at Kiddush or schmoozing over communal Shabbat dinners; in marking a life transition at services, crying at a b'mitzvah, kvelling at a baby naming, or rejoicing with bride and groom before a wedding; when sitting with an old friend on a bench outside the shul between services on Yom Kippur, every time we come here, we “look up, look at each other, and start the conversation,” and in the process, we deepen our capacity for empathy, remorse, apology, forgiveness, recovery, and redemption.

Gathering as a Jewish community makes us more fully, deeply human in an electronic world that is eroding our humanity. Synagogues are where Jewish people go to be deepened. They have been ever since the days when our sages warned, after the fall of the 2nd Temple, *Al tifros min hatzibbur*—“Do not separate yourself from the community”—*keep congregating*. In their prescient wisdom, they taught, *b'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lihiyot ish*—“in a place where no one's being human, strive to

be a human being.” The sages, of course, didn’t know from electronic technology. They just knew that when you crossed the threshold from the outside world into the synagogue, you were stepping into a space that would change you profoundly because of what you’d encounter there. Every time they crossed that threshold, they would recite the same words with which our service began this morning and begins every morning we come together for communal prayer: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*—“How good are your tents, O Jacob, your tabernacles, O Israel.” How unique are these Jewish gathering places that take us to a deeper place—so special that stepping into them calls for a blessing.

My sermon this morning isn’t a call for a moratorium on electronic technology. Our Progressive movement has always been about helping our people navigate the straddling of two worlds—the ancient and the modern. Our rabbis don’t call for the negation of either. To the contrary, while we do minimise the use of technology in shul on Shabbat and festivals, we’re all for it the rest of the time. We *want* you to read your emails from us! We want you to engage with our Facebook page, and click on our website to see all that we offer. We open our parking lot for people who drive here, even today, and we *want* your vehicles to fill it! The gates and bollards that protect us operate on electrical currents. We use lights so you can see the writing in the prayerbook and we can read from the Torah scroll. We heat and cool our sanctuary and grounds. We even have a lift in our other building, which will operate every day of the year. But all of these electronic technologies are in service to the technology of synagogue: coming together to help one another grow deeper. Electronic technology is merely utilised; the technology of *synagogue* merits our blessing: *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*.

The sages warned: “Don’t separate yourself from the community.” In places bereft of humanity, strive to be human. We mustn’t forget how to dance the dance of the Ellas’ apology. The dance of the difficult break up. The dance of stepping into another’s shoes and feeling empathy. We mustn’t lose what makes us [quote] “little less than Divine, crown[ing] us with glory and honor”—our ability to converse and negotiate, comfort and debate, forgive and recover. Our synagogues are communities of profundity that teach us how to be more fully human, reminding us, each time we enter, to look up, look at each other, and start the conversation. Synagogue is the antidote to our shallowing—our technology for a deeper humanity.

¹ <https://news.umich.edu/empathy-college-students-don-t-have-as-much-as-they-used-to/>