

Rosh Hashanah 5771 – Living with a Mitzvah Mindset

Rabbi Michael Safra

At the next Level Church outside Charlotte NC, worshippers are not reminded before services to silence their cell phones. A year and a half ago, Pastor Todd Hahn prefaced his Easter Sunday sermon by saying, “I hope many of you are tweeting this morning about your experience with God.”

For those not familiar with tweeting, it is the verb form of what you do from your phone or on a website called Twitter. Individuals create “microblogs,” which are little statements, 140 characters or less, that can be posted on the internet for the world to see. People on Twitter can have hundreds, thousands or, (in the case of political candidates) many more followers who read their “tweets”. You can imagine the sermon that morning with the pastor speaking and the congregants thumbing away on their cell phones with these short statements about what was going on.

I don’t want to give you any ideas. But let’s say you *were* tweeting right now. What might you be saying? Some of you would undoubtedly be thumbing out a cynical summary for this sermon before I even start, something like “I get it. Do one more mitzvah this year!”

If you waited until I was finished, I hope you might write something a little different; something more like: “Technology provides instant gratification. Responsibility makes my existence meaningful. Try a Mitzvah Mindset.”

In 2006, Time Magazine picked as its person of the year: You. The cover of the magazine had a mirror with the caption, “Yes you. You control the information age. Welcome to your world.” The magazine picked up on a fact that is even truer four years later – that in our technologically advanced world, our powers are virtually unlimited. If I want to, I can read the newspaper, order a new pair of shoes, research the history of the Haskalah movement in France, find a new gourmet recipe for dinner, and have a video conference with cousins in Israel – all at the same time and without leaving my house. And if I want to leave the house, I can do all these things somewhere else on my cell phone. We are

truly living in the age of “I” – as in i-pod, i-phone, or i-pad; or perhaps it is the age of “my” as in I expect my needs to be serviced almost instantaneously.

Technology is a great thing. It sometimes seems like the world was created for me. I can shop in the middle of the night if I want to. And I don’t have to worry about finding something on a store shelf because I can shop at thousands of stores – and their warehouses – all at once. During the power outages over the past months we saw how difficult it is to function without the technologies we have come to rely on. But the very benefits of technology – its ability to serve my needs and the feeling of instant gratification – these benefits are also modernity’s greatest challenges. This morning I want to explore a Jewish approach to making life meaningful in our modern world.

A story is told of the Hasidic Rebbe Naftali Zvi of Ropschitz, a little town in Poland. At that time – in the 18th century – it was the custom for the rich people whose houses stood isolated or at the far end of the town to hire men to watch over their property by night. Late one evening when Rabbi Naftali was skirting the woods that circled the city, he met such a watchman walking up and down. “For whom are you working?” he asked. The man told him and then in turn asked Rabbi Naftali, “And for whom are you working, Rabbi?” The words struck the *tzaddik* like a shaft. “I am not working for anybody just yet,” he barely managed to say. He walked up and down beside the man for a long time. “Will you be come work for me?” Rabbi Naftali finally asked. “I should like to,” the man replied, “but what would be my duties?” Rabbi Naftali answered, “To remind me.”

In our World of I, we sometimes need that reminder. There are needs greater than our own, which we have a responsibility to serve. We have to remember whom we really work for.

One of the great theologians of the 20th century, Martin Buber, spoke about the experience of God in terms of the relationship between I and Thou. Ordinary relationships are “I-It” relationships. When I go to a restaurant and I meet the server, I am not particularly interested in getting to know that person. He or she has a job to do; I have a need; but the relationship rarely develops beyond this most superficial level. The server becomes almost an inanimate object, fulfilling a task. On the other hand, I have a real interest in getting to know and understand my spouse, my children and my friends. This is the “I-Thou relationship” – when I want to know another person, when I want to be of service to

another person, when I feel a sense of responsibility towards another person. God is found when I look at another person and see a human being with needs no different from my own.

If you looked at our program guide, you know that we are going to be spending a lot of time over the course of the year talking about *mitzvot*. Rabbi Schnitzer and I will be leading a 12-week discussion called the Mitzvah Initiative, and I hope you will participate. The idea is not just to pick a favorite activity from a list or to learn what *mitzvot* are. The idea is to create meaning, to add a sense of deliberation to the concept of *mitzvah*. You might say that we want to transform *mitzvah* into מצוה.

You know what a *mitzvah* is. A *mitzvah* is a good deed. In nursery school my children were asked to come up with ideas to help make a Mitzvah Tree – and you might guess what the kids came up with: sharing toys, being nice to our parents, visiting grandma, and the like. These are all examples of *mitzvahs*, but we can see why “good deed” is not enough of an explanation for what a מצוה really is. There is nothing particularly Jewish about sharing my toys – it’s a *mitzvah*, but if our kids weren’t learning about *mitzvahs*, we’d still want them to play nicely with their friends. And “good deeds” leaves out all the *mitzvahs* like Shabbat and *kashrut* and *shofar* and *sukkah*, which are all important but could not fairly be called “good deeds”.

If you were orthodox or were translating the word literally, you would say that a *mitzvah* is a commandment. You’d be right, but commandment implies a Commander and an enforcement mechanism. And for many people *mitzvah* used in that orthodox sense lacks that kind of purpose and meaning; it’s just something that Jews do.

Instead of *mitzvah*, I want you to think of מצוה. Even the pronunciation – מצוה – suggests deliberateness and intentionality. The goal is not just to get you to do “one more *mitzvah*” – there will be time for that. The goal is to think with a מצוה Mindset. מצוה in this sense is about creating that I-Thou relationship; it’s about service and responsibility.

A colleague, Rabbi Sarah Graf, explains her own “aha” moment to the concept of *mitzvah* as relationship and responsibility. It came the first time she was woken up in the middle of the night by a crying baby. Anyone who has experienced it knows what I’m talking about – that feeling that you would rather be doing something else but there is an important person in the other room who needs you, a sense of obligation to a higher Purpose, a sense of responsibility born out of love. And, in our house at least, *mitzvot* sometimes tire you out.

Think of the first of the Ten Commandments – there’s a debate among the rabbis about whether it is even a commandment at all, but that’s a subject for another time. “אנכי ה' אלהיך, I am the Lord your God.” It doesn’t say, “I am the Lord your God who created a beautiful world for you to enjoy.” It says, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, from the House of Service, מבית עבדים.” Our ability to practice Judaism, to accept the commandments, was born out of our experience of servitude. We couldn’t accept the Torah until we understood what it meant to serve. Especially in the World of I, we need that sense of responsibility, obligation, relationship, service to other people and ultimately to God.

So if we need a tweet to sum up what I’ve said to this point, try Hillel’s famous saying from Pirkei Avot, the Teachings of Our Rabbis: “אם אין אני לי מי לי וכשאני לעצמי מה אני, If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am only for myself, what am I?” In the Age of I, our service of a greater Purpose is as important as ever.

And now I want to turn to the challenge of instant gratification. The late Rabbi Sidney Greenberg complained of a “modern American” who was once overheard offering a crisp prayer: “Dear God, please grant me patience. And I want it right now.” Commenting on the frenetic pace of contemporary life, Rabbi Greenberg points out that the words we use to describe our daily actions are all fast – “We leap out of bed, we gulp our coffee, we whiz into town, we dash to the office, we [race] home ... and we drop dead.” Rabbi Greenberg wrote those words in 1982, before the internet made it worse with the concept of “multitasking”. Multitasking is originally a computer term – computers with faster chips are better at multitasking. But it is a fallacy. When a computer seems to be doing two things at once, it is really just switching between tasks very quickly. We know that sometimes the computer does that flawlessly and sometimes it gets overwhelmed and freezes up and we get frustrated and have to start over. The concept of multitasking as applied to human beings is a myth as well.

How many of us are guilty – I know I am – of checking e-mails while we’re supposed to be spending time with family or paying attention at a meeting? We kid ourselves into thinking we are doing two things at once. But we’re really taking time from what’s important in order to devote time to something else – because it is so easy to do.

In a world that is more complicated than ever, it sometimes feels like our lives have been reduced to 30-second soundbites. My colleague Rabbi Irwin Kula laments that our world has seemingly been taken over by McDonalds. The Jewish problem with the Big Mac is not just the food. The problem is with the notion that you are supposed to drive up to a window and gulp down your food in the car. The problem is with the idea that everything is already there waiting for you; the problem is with the notion that you can't even say what it is you want because you have to order by number. The problem is multitasking.

This is at least one of the purposes of Shabbat. The book of Genesis describes how on the seventh God rested, *שבת וינפש*. The word *vayinafash* is not terribly common in the Torah. It comes from the root word *nefesh*, which means soul. On the seventh day, God rested and “resouled.” The deeper purpose of Shabbat is to “resoul”, to stop and think, to love and to enjoy, to lend meaning to the work we do on the other six days.

There are people who don't observe the traditional Shabbat – some of whom are not even Jewish – who have begun the practice of a “Technology Sabbath”, turning off cell phones and using the time to concentrate on real people and real responsibilities and on appreciating the world around them. Sometimes we need to slow down to appreciate what really matters.

When the Israelites left Egypt, the Torah tells us that God chose not to lead them to the Promised Land by way of the Land of the Philistines, “כי קרוב הוא, BECAUSE it was closer.” God deliberately chose the longer, harder route because the people needed time to contemplate the meaning of freedom. They needed to experience hard work. They needed to think, to understand, to appreciate everything they had around them.

That's why we have blessings. The Talmud tells us that “One who enjoys something in this world without reciting a blessing is considered as one having stolen.” We are most familiar with the blessings for food; but there are also blessings for natural beauties – seeing a rainbow, hearing thunder, smelling a sweet spice. And there are blessings for encountering people – when you see someone for the first time in a long while, you can recite the *she-heheyanu*; when you see a very learned person, there's a blessing to recite; when you see someone who is different, you don't gawk but you can recite a blessing acknowledging God who creates so many different, unique individuals. Blessings enable us to appreciate life. We have tools to overcome the challenges of multitasking and instant gratification.

To put that in Twitter form, I quote the 2nd century sage Rabbi Yitzchak: “האומר לא יגעת ומצאתי אל” תאמן, Anyone who says I didn’t work hard and I accomplished something instantaneously – do not believe him.”

It is ironic that while technology can do so much to service our needs, it also takes something from us that we tend to hold sacred. One of the truths about technology is that we are never anonymous. Things we say or do can be recorded and placed on the internet. Pictures of a college student doing childish and stupid things that can be easily found years later by a potential employer. We know there are predators who can watch what sites we visit or steal personal information. In February, a Pennsylvania school district was sued for allegedly using school-issued laptops to spy on students outside of school. These computers had webcams on them and if students took them home, administrators could see what they students were doing there.

As parents we want to protect our children from this invasion of privacy and we need to teach them to be careful. But Judaism also teaches that privacy is not necessarily a right or a virtue. After Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, the Torah tells us that they recognized that they were naked. They gained so much, but they also became self aware and they realized they could be seen by others. The Torah tells us that they soon found out that they couldn’t hide from God either; and neither can we.

There is a Hasidic story about a rabbi who was travelling in a horse-drawn wagon by a field in the countryside. The driver pulled over to the side of the road and got out to pick produce from the field for himself. He asked the rabbi to watch for passers-by and to shout out if he saw anyone coming.

Moments after the driver left the wagon, the rabbi shouted out, “You’re being watched! You’re being watched!” The driver ran back to the wagon, but he didn’t see any person coming. He asked the rabbi why he had made such a fuss if nobody was coming and the rabbi explained that our Master in Heaven is always watching what we do. In the Jewish mindset, there is no such thing as anonymity.

In the World of I, virtually anyone can publish a book. We are all famous and we are all leaders. And we have to be careful to ensure that our actions reflect that reality. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin urges

us to keep a simple principle in mind. “Imagine that your activities today will be headlined in the *New York Times* tomorrow.”

Rosh Hashanah is a time to consider how we want to be seen by those who are watching. Will we be seen helping out on Mitzvah Day or volunteering on a committee or striving to make prayer or study a part of our routine; or will we be seen trying to duck below the radar in order to preserve privacy?

Obviously we each have a right to some measure of alone-time; we need to fight to protect some form of privacy. But a person in the Mitzvah Mindset isn't completely afraid of being seen. We want to be seen as models for living life with a capital “L”.

Rabbi Judah the Prince said it well in Pirkei Avot, but he could have posted it on Twitter: “Look at three things and you will never sin: Know what is above you – an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are recorded.”

On Rosh Hashanah 1941, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto Rabbi Kalonymous Kamish Shapira told his congregants that it makes sense that the time for repentance coincides with the anniversary of the creation of the world. “This is because repentance ...is also a kind of creativity.” We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. In the coming year I pray that our attention to *mitzvot* may lead us towards that goal. In our fast-paced, over-programmed world, it is difficult to argue that we need to “do more things.” But now more than ever, in the world of “I”, we need to incorporate the Mitzvah Mindset.

We need a Mitzvah Mindset that encourages us to strengthen our relationships with others and to serve a higher purpose. We need a Mitzvah Mindset that enables us to slow down and live, to appreciate our world and to tell loved ones what they mean to us. We need a Mitzvah Mindset that understands that each of us is a leader, each of us is worthy of being watched and emulated. We need a Mitzvah Mindset that will help us to become the best human beings we can possibly be, in the words of the 3rd century sage Rav: “The *mitzvot* were given for the sole purpose of refining human beings.”

I will conclude with a tweet that I recently found, which sums up my prayers for the year ahead. It was apparently posted at 11:01 am, August 14, 344 BCE from @grekotweets, otherwise known as Alexander III of Macedon. I bet you didn't know they had Twitter then. It read: "Accomplishments just earned me title 'Alexander the Good.' Must work harder." Shanah Tovah.