

Good Night iPad: A Story for Our Time

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Yom Kippur
September 26, 2012*

I am sure many of you are familiar with, and perhaps even grew up with the wonderful children's book, "Good Night Moon." I used to love reading it to my children when they were little. The room slowly growing darker, the grandmother whispering hush, the picture of the cow jumping over the moon, the little noises all were so reassuring, calming and comforting. What a great way to put a child to sleep --- and sometimes, a parent as well.

A few months ago I came across and bought an updated contemporary version, a parody, appropriate for our digital age entitled, "Good Night iPad." The book which could have just as easily been called, "Good Night Moon 2.0" is written by an author with the pseudonym Ann Droyd. The concept and illustrations are cute, but I would not suggest that you rush out to "upgrade" and replace or the original.

Whereas the original classic we all know and love, opens: "In the great green room there was a telephone, and a red balloon, and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon. The newer version begins, "In the bright buzzing room, there was an iPad and a kid playing doom, and a screensaver of a bird launching over the moon...." Instead of a granny sitting in a rocking chair reading a book, the modern version has a grandparent "reading a nook with 10,000 books." The room has been appropriately retrofitted with a huge LCD, WiFi HDTV, six remotes, 3-D, Netflix streams and a video of a cat doing flips. The scary noises in the room are generated not by mysterious things squeaking or creaking, but by the bings, bongs and beeps of emails and tweets. The concluding pages have been changed from --- "Goodnight stars, goodnight air, goodnight noises everywhere" to "Goodnight pop stars. Goodnight MacBook Air. Goodnight gadgets everywhere."

The book is a metaphor for our time and for this generation. We are the always connected, always turned on generation. We live in a day and age where technology intrudes and invades just about every aspect of our lives.

Technology has unquestionably wrought unbelievable improvements in our world and has dramatically raised our standard of living. In our personal lives we can use our smart phones for directions and to help us in a multitude of ways. I have heard that today's cell phone is more sophisticated and powerful than the computers that sent Apollo 11 to the moon and back. The internet allows us to communicate across geographic spans. From personal experience, I can attest that Skype has made it easier to stay in touch with grandchildren, wherever they may be. It is possible to video chat with clients and co-workers and to use software to streamline business processes. We can quickly and efficiently get word out and disseminate a warning in the event of a disaster. In the political sphere the social media can play a role in helping to topple oppressive regimes. The medical advances alone, many of which

have come from Israel, and lives saved as a result are astounding. We are the beneficiaries of these innovations. Just the other day I read about a high school student in Michigan whose name was submitted as a cruel joke and prank to be in the homecoming court. Feeling unworthy and picked on, all that turned around when people rallied to her side with several thousand responding to a Facebook page posting about what had been done to her. As a result of the support and encouragement she has received, she writes she is now stronger and has more self-esteem than before.

But as is true of anything, there is a downside as well.

All of this technology can be distracting and lead to a lack of concentration in the classroom, workplace or while driving. Thank God people don't do something really dangerous, like texting during services or during a sermon!

The world is changing so rapidly it is hard to keep up with the newest and latest websites and social media outlets and innovations. There was a time not too long ago when the word "tablet" referred to a pill or the Ten Commandments. Believe it or not, someone sent me an article about a synagogue where congregants were encouraged to send text messages to the Rabbi during the Rosh HaShana service such as the transgressions and sins they had committed or who they'd like to forgive. It said that during the service, the rabbi tried to respond to as many messages as she could. Kind of puts the words "to be written in the Book of Life" in a different context.

The advent of and wide spread access to the internet means false rumors and hateful racist speech can reach a wider audience in a shorter period of time. Surveillance by government agencies in places like China and other totalitarian regimes can backfire and have harmful repercussions. There have been tragic incidents reported in the news of online stalking, postings and surveillance where the ending was not as happy as the one was for the young girl in Michigan. Research indicates that excessive internet activity can lead to addictive behaviors, some of which can be destructive as people enter into realms where they think they are protected by anonymity, but are not, as they delve into activities they might otherwise not be exposed to and would normally shun.

Educators grapple with this brave new world and struggle to understand how to implement and utilize technology to promote independent creative thinking, knowing that it can squelch it as well. In fact, in preparing this sermon I came across an article on the pros and cons of technology, which had the following disclaimer, "While the free essays on this website can give you inspiration for writing, they cannot be used 'as is' because they will not meet your assignment's requirements. If you need a custom written term paper, you can hire a writer to custom write an authentic essay that will pass any plagiarism test." It closes with the promise, "Waste no more time!"

Indeed, saving time is a major advantage of the technological innovations of our day and age, allowing us to communicate with many people simultaneously. But more and more researchers are exploring the question of what is the price we are paying for these changes in our lifestyle.

No wonder we seem lonelier than ever before. A cover story in *Atlantic Magazine* entitled, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” suggests that spending more time alone in front of our computer screens is making us both lonely and narcissistic. The fusion of distance with intimacy creates the illusion of community when in reality we are withdrawing from real contact, substituting virtual worlds for reality, online friends for real friendships. Not the cause or source of our society’s problems, the technology highlights and exacerbates tendencies, including those that make us self-centered and encourages and fosters quick, superficial exchanges.

After all, is it really possible to have 3,000 friends, and what does it mean to have so many supposed friends? Sherry Turkle, psychologist and author of, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other” has written that although we are constantly connected and communicating, it comes at the expense of real conversation and meaningful connections.


I speak about this issue today because it is symptomatic of larger problems we as a society and as individuals must confront. I speak about it today because detaching from reality has implications for our human interactions and is affecting the quality of our relationships, which ultimately is a primary focus of Yom Kippur. And I speak about it today, because Judaism has a response.

The discussion about technology reminds me of the story in the midrash about fire. Long ago our sages pointed out that fire has the power to destroy homes and take lives. Yet it can also be used to meld copper and to build as well. Whether it is used constructively or destructively, to harm and destroy, or to repair and create, as a weapon or as a tool, is in our hands and is determined by how we choose to use it.

Perhaps you have encountered the situation where families sit together, but no one is talking to each other. They are all busy texting and reading e-mails. Is that really the way we want to live?

At the Yizkor service later this afternoon I will refer to an article by Dan Zevin about the bygone days of family car rides where his dad dispensed advice and tidbits of wisdom. Those rides are now replaced by zombie-like children playing on their iPads or cell phones which have become convenient babysitters to keep our children quiet and sedated. The spillover of living in a 24 hour news cycle is that we demand more rapid responses from colleagues, friends, and business associates. Just see what happens if you don’t answer an email promptly enough. Vacations used to be sacrosanct time away from the office, for couples or families to relax and reconnect. Now they are just an extension of work and little more than an interim break from the routine of going to the office in a different setting and surrounding as we answer voice mails and emails wherever we may be in the world.

By being always accessible and available, rather than better connect us to each other, we have erected barriers that are obstacles between us. We are easily distracted and ignore the person in front of us to answer a text or email. When someone takes out a cellphone and starts texting, sometimes in the middle of a conversation, a date, a show, a movie, or whatever – it is saying – something else and someone else is more important or more deserving of my attention right now than you. I therefore will ignore you to tend to this other matter. This etiquette and protocol contributes to greater alienation.

When we sing the song right before the conclusion of services HaYom, HaYom, HaYom, , with its popular refrain and melody the meaning of the prayer is “Today.” In contrast to the popular and most widely recorded Beatles’ ballad, “Yesterday” or the popular Broadway show tune from the play Annie, “Tomorrow”, HaYom through its repetition reminds us to focus on today, to be in the moment.

Our sages understood how important this is. It is the reason they advocated praying and doing a mitzvah with *kavannah*. *Kavannah* means focus, intention, and direction. It entails concentrating on what you are doing at that moment and the meaning behind the action you are doing. I always tell our b’nai mitzvah before the beginning of every service when we gather in the Holt Chapel to pray with *kavannah*, meaning, be in the moment. I say to them, “do not be distracted and do not allow yourself to think about other things.”

Last week I asked our high school kids to make a pledge to turn off their cell phones, and not to use television, their computers or to text for the 25 hours of Yom Kippur. There was a collective gasp. You would have thought I had asked them to practice a form of self mutilation or to give up food or going to the mall for a month. They have become so dependent they cannot imagine a world without being connected, much less going a period of time without their electronic attachments.

Having extensively studied the effect of mobile communication on our lives Turkle claims that the hand held devices that have become so ubiquitous have changed not only what we do, but even who we are. Neurological research in a study conducted at the University of Maryland indicates that there is a difference in brain images and patterns between those who use electronic devices excessively and those who do not, with the brain waves of heavy users resembling that of people with addictive tendencies.

Although we are conditioned to constantly being asked by online surveys our opinions and what is on our mind, we do not necessarily reveal our true thoughts, or share our innermost concerns, feelings or vulnerabilities to others. We make the mistake of thinking our quest for constant connection will make us less isolated and less lonely. In reality, the opposite is true. Young people who have grown up fearing conversation show up on the job wearing earphones. A few months ago I came across two kids sitting next to each other after services, during the Kiddush sitting in the back of the sanctuary. They had finished eating, and each was totally absorbed in the game they were playing on their phone. I went over and told them to turn off their devices. I said to them, “Turn it off. Try talking to each other.”

Our human relationships are suffering as a result of being so attached to all this technology. Human relationships are rich, messy and demanding. They require work, and direct ongoing contact and interaction. This is what makes them fruitful and meaningful. Ultimately, our relationships and the challenges that come with them form the texture that weaves the fabric of our lives. Teshuvah, turning towards each other and our loved ones, working on healing and repairing those relationships is an essential element of what we are supposed to think about and work on today.

As we expect more from technology, we expect less from one another. Consequently we increasingly explore alternatives that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship. There are reports of robots being developed to serve as home companions, and I worry that for some people, their new bff, best friend forever is Siri, the Apple phone digital assistant.

In between all our texts, emails, tweets, blogs and Facebook postings we need to find the time and the means to actually listen and speak with one another. We need to get back to having more frequent and more meaningful real conversations, where we see the concern or pain in the eyes of another, where we can truly touch and be touched by human expression and interaction, even just so we can share silence together.

The remedy for the alienation we are experiencing, not surprisingly has already been invented. And as you may have surmised, was brought to the world by Judaism. I have read a number of articles in the past couple of years addressing the problem, and they all have a common answer to the ailments affecting us as a society. They all suggest turning off your phones and other portable electronic devices, shutting down and disengaging from your work and computer and other technology for 24 hours a week. Use it they suggest as an opportunity to actually engage in conversation with family and friends. There are campaigns, called "Unplug for a day." We call it, Shabbat.

It was as revolutionary and counter culture, going against the grain of the rest of the world when first introduced thousands of years ago, as it is today. The Romans mocked the concept and said Jews were lazy for taking a day off of work. But our rabbis realized it would be liberating. Preventing us from becoming slaves to our work was deemed a critical aspect of the human condition. They saw the benefit of a day of rest, of not creating, but of appreciating what had been created in the preceding days. This day of reflection allowed humans to imitate God by resting and rejuvenating our souls, our relationships, our connection to nature and the Divine. What was true then is even more true today.

Noted psychologist and sex therapist, a proud practicing Jew, Dr. Ruth writes in Tablet magazine, "The one thing you must do in the New Year is pay greater attention to the humans next to you than the gadget in your hand. No matter how much you love your phone, it will never hold your hand or make your heart flutter. If you want to have a productive year, if you want to feel the warmth of human contact, if you want to marry or stay married, have children

and get the most that life has to offer, put your gadgets down and connect to those around you with your mind, your arms, and your heart.”

You can do it. Try it. Trust me. Turn off your cellphones and stay away from your computers for a day a week. Liberate yourselves. You will be better off as a result. Connect instead with family, friends, community and God. It will help you achieve better balance in your lives, and will bring you a sense of peace, of shalom. This is what we mean when we wish each other Shabbat shalom, a Sabbath of peace.

Good night Moon. Good night iPad. Shabbat Shalom instead.

*©Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
September 26, 2012
Potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*