

Erev Rosh Hashanah
Congregation Beth Israel
2008/5769

This afternoon, I had a few important things to do before coming to services. You know, I had to send out some last minute texts, set the DVR so Lisa won't miss Dancing with the Stars, sync my palm and my ipod, and catch-up on Facebook. Texting from my cell phone, prepping my ipod and setting my DVR all didn't take very long. However, checking my Facebook page took some time because I haven't logged-on in a while, so I had to poke back a whole bunch of my friends, I needed to superpoke a few people as well, check my wall, write on other people's walls, and I had respond to 4 messages in my inbox. Of course, I had to check my groups, see if anyone tagged me in a photo, look at people's status updates and update my own status...Rony is missing Monday Night Football.

If you are familiar with Facebook, and/or if you're "on it" so to speak then you should know exactly what I'm talking about. However, if this is the first time you've ever heard about of Facebook...please let me explain.

According to Wikipedia (a free open content online encyclopedia) Facebook is a social networking website designed to connect people together into one huge online community. Facebook users can "build their community" and accumulate "friends", as long as both parties

accept the friendship. As of last count I have 286 Facebook friends...which for many other Facebook users is not that impressive.

Facebook is fabulous because I've been able to reconnect to dozens of people who I haven't seen or spoken with for many years. I get to hear about their lives and I can fill them in about mine. Facebook creates cyber-communities throughout the world. Although I use Facebook user and I know that it helps to connect people, I still wonder what are the depths of these relationships.

Are we really friends with our Facebook friends? 99% of the time written conversations on Facebook are shorter than 3 sentences, updates are 3-4 words, and no one gets to really say anything. We are guarded, no one can see us, and we only share what we want. No one can see my facial expression when I accept them as a friend...and I don't get to see theirs either. Facebook can be fun, but when technology takes the place of actual communication, real relationships, and genuine community we are unable to be fully present in our lives.

Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Hebrew Union College states "Technology further complicates the notion of community. It provides new options for many people. It allows the community or elements in it to reach thousands and thousands of people. Yet many questions remain. Do 'virtual communities' constitute genuine communities?"

Personal interaction between people has decreased significantly in recent years. Instead of a nice, thoughtful, and detailed letter we write emails. And now, we can text message someone and produce even less writing. Text-messaging doesn't even require us to use full words...we can say "c u L8er" using single letters and numbers.

Stephen Spyker writes in his book Technology & Spirituality "When we engage each other via the internet the experience is *mediated* by the technology." We have nothing tangible, nothing to hold on to, or grasp. We may lose a sense of true connection without physically experiencing something."

"Increasingly the web is not solely used to access vast quantities of data, it's become a place for people to come together, to *be* together, in cyberspace. But is this being together in cyberspace the same as *being* together in physical space?

What does *being* together in physical space mean? Truly *being* together should mean community. A community is not people at a sporting event, or at a concert, on a plane together, or sitting next to each other at an internet café. Sadly, even standing here as we pray together doesn't mean that we are a true community unless we are fully present.

Proximity doesn't constitute a connection. We can all think of people who we really feel close to, even though they live far away. We have a

true connection to them; because we are fully present when we interact with them. They are emotionally present in our lives even if they aren't physically present.

Tomorrow morning we will read the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. This is the story of God's test for Abraham, in which Abraham almost sacrifices his son. The text begins with God calling to Abraham, and Abraham responding with a resounding Hineini. English does not have a direct translation of the word, but the closest is –I am fully present. When summoned for God's test Abraham was fully present. When God called, Abraham didn't have to turn off his ipod and say to Sarah, "is that my cell or yours?" Abraham didn't check the call-id, and say "ah" I'll call God back after Grey's Anatomy. He wasn't juggling all the pieces of technology that help us to keep in touch with each other without REALLY connecting.

The Swiss novelist Max Frisch writes that technology is the knack of arranging the world so we do not have to experience it. Each day our lives are packed with work, errands, and taking care of our family; sometimes we can find ourselves on autopilot schlepping from place to place without realizing where we're going. So, how can we be fully present in everything that we do? Whether its God calling us, a spouse, a child, or a friend, how can we answer them with Hineini: I am fully present and available to you.

Hineini means being fully present in our lives; it means limiting our technology overload. We can walk over and say hello to a co-worker, instead of just sending another email. Say thank you to the barista at Coffee Bean, instead of talking on a Bluetooth. Have lunch with a friend instead of sending a text; *carve-out the time to be present in someone else's life*. I challenge all of us to write at least 10 letters this year.

I challenge all of us to have at least one technology free evening with our family's a month; just one evening of no cell phones, no television, no internet, no texting- just an evening of family, just an evening of conversations, just an evening to invite God's presence into our lives. Take this opportunity to take a rest, a Shabbat from our gadgets.

In addition, I challenge all of us to make Congregation Beth Israel, a technology free environment during Shabbat and holidays: turn off your cell phones and pagers when you walk through the door into the house of God. We don't need to be texting during religious services and we don't need to be connected technologically for those precious moments...God and our community should be the only connections. Hineni – being fully present means stopping the car for a minute and talking to people during religious school and pre-school drop off and pick up...I promise that Starbucks and Einstein's will still be there twenty minutes later. Hineini means making time for the truly important people in our lives.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes in his book Floating Takes Faith – We can avoid both conversation and introspection in this age of the internet, television, ipods, DVDs, and Blackberries. We can be constantly in touch without ever being in contact.

Yet, how can we check email, text message, and answer our cell phones but transfer the importance of an internet connection to a spiritual connection?

Nationwide Insurance reported “The prevalence of driving while distracted can be attributed to technology and our societal mindset to be available at all times.” Why do we need to be so accessible? What is our infatuation with faster connections and the latest gadgets ...are we afraid that we might miss something. Instead of being fully present in each moment we often try to be in every moment. When God called, Abraham answered Hineini, I am fully present. When technology takes the place of actual communication, real relationships, and genuine community we are unable to be fully present in our lives. It’s ironic that the social networking website is called Facebook, because it has become a replacement for face to face interactions. Community doesn’t just occur, it needs cultivation and energy. Pressing a button will not digitally form meaningful interactions. Actual communication, real relationships, and genuine community can happen, but they can only happen when we say Hineini!