

Communication and Community

Rabbi Hillel Silverman tells this story. "A woman goes to a lawyer and tells him that she wants a divorce. The lawyer asks, 'Do you have grounds?' She says, 'About half an acre.' He says, 'No, that's not what I meant. Do you have a grudge?' She says, 'No, we have a carport instead.' By this time, the lawyer is getting frustrated. He says to her, speaking very carefully, 'Tell me, does he beat you up?' She says, 'No, I get up in the morning before he does.' By now, the lawyer has really had it. He says to her, 'Will you please tell me exactly why you want a divorce?' She answers, 'Because he doesn't understand me!'"

Understanding each other has been a complex issue since the time God told Adam and Eve to enjoy the Garden of Eden except for the fruit of one tree. Apparently, that message also was hard to understand. And in this morning's Torah reading, we find more interesting communications issues. Sarah directs Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham is very reluctant to do so until God tells him to go ahead; everything will work out for the best. But as Hagar and Ishmael are "wandering aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheva," the water Abraham provided them is completely consumed. After Hagar leaves Ishmael (v. 15-16) "under a bush; she walked and sat down at a distance, about a bowshot away, thinking: 'Let me not see the child's death.'" Now Hagar weeps and the boy, Ishmael, cries. According to the Women's Commentary on the Torah, "the verse states that she placed her child at some distance, implying that they could not hear each other." And yet, when an angel of God calls to Hagar from heaven and shows her a well of water, Hagar obviously has no trouble hearing the angel! In Midrash Rabbah, it estimates that the distance between Hagar and Ishmael was two thousand cubits, a bit more than half a mile. So Hagar was not able to hear Ishmael's cry from half a mile and yet heard the angel calling to her from heaven! Sometimes we only listen to the messages we choose to hear.

Today, it seems unlikely that Hagar could have escaped Ishmael's cries at even a far great distance than half a mile, or that an angel would need to call out from heaven. Obviously, today, either one would have celled or texted Hagar. Please do not view this sermon as being anti-technology. Let me remind some of you, and inform others, that I was the one who promoted Brith Sholom having a computer in the mid-1980s. The Board of that time was so skeptical about the potential of needing a computer that I had to ask a generous Jack Shaffer, of blessed memory, to buy the first computer, monitor and printer for our office. And when it was time to upgrade, I had to go back to Jack. If you asked our webmaster, Mark Blass, I think he would tell you that I send most of the updated information for our website and found most of the links to other sites. I check email several times a day, unlike the congregants who tell me they check once a week. I am absolutely positive that there will be a steady stream of enhancements for our communications devices and have no pretense that any scientific development can be stopped by anyone.

But I do have three concerns: are we controlling the technology or is it controlling us? What is the impact of communication on community? And what are the unintended consequences of even the current communications devices, let alone the future developments?

Are any of you familiar with Julie Zingesser? She is a teen who was the focus of a story by Donna St. George in The Washington Post this past February. The title of the article: "6,473 Texts a Month, But at What Cost?" "Julie Zingesser texts at home, at school, in the car while her mother is driving. She texts during homework, after pompon practice and as she walks the family dog. She takes her cellphone with her to bed... 'I would die without it,' Julie, 15, says of her text life. . . . For [Julie's mother,] Pam ... the big issue is not cost ... but the effects of so much messaging. Pam wonders: What will this generation learn and what will they lose in the relentless stream of sentence fragments, abbreviations and emoticons? ...

Parents, educators and researchers are grappling with similar concerns as text messaging has exploded across the formative years of the nation's youngest generation. Teens now do more texting on their cellphones than calling." ...

Parenthetically, I became aware of this change at Kiddush a few weeks ago when Ann Stehney pointed out that "celling," calling each other on cell phones, is for "older" people, like those in their late twenties and thirties. College students don't even bother to check the messages left on their cell phones. They are all into texting! This reminds me to encourage you in the strongest possible way to come to services tomorrow morning, when my colleague, Rabbi Seth Goren, will deliver the sermon. We have not collaborated on the contents, but I know that he will discuss the younger generation of the Jewish community and communication. Rabbi Goren doubtless has a very different view of the technology from what I have. I hope he does, so that you will be forced to think about these issues from multiple perspectives. Commentators have long since found different meanings in the text of the Torah. There is no reason why we should not find different views of texting as well as of text.

"Nationally, more than 75 billion text messages are sent a month, ... Teenagers with cellphones average 2,272 text messages a month, compared with 203 calls, according to the Nielsen Co. ... The American Journal of Psychiatry published an editorial last year by psychiatrist Jerald J. Block, suggesting that addiction to the Internet and text messaging be included in the diagnostic manual for mental illness.... 'Overall,' Block said... 'our use of technology today amounts to a large social experiment. We still don't know how it helps us or how it hurts us.' Addicted or not, hard-core texters find it difficult to be 'in the moment' with other people because they are constantly being summoned by someone else in another place, said Naomi S. Baron, professor of linguistics at American University."

In the January 28, 2009 TIME magazine, there was an article: "Inside China's Fight Against Internet Addiction" by Jessie Jiang. "Even though it was only a week before the Spring Festival — the most important family holiday on the Chinese calendar — Wang Hongxia was forcing her son out of the house. She took her 12-year-old from their home in the northwestern city of Xian to a secluded Beijing military compound more than 700 miles away. Like many other parents across China today, Wang felt as though she had no choice. "Things have absolutely gone out of control," said Wang, 45, almost in tears. "My son just beat and bit me again this morning after I wouldn't let him touch the computer." ...

The U.S.- based Center for Internet Addiction Recovery classifies the disorder as compulsive behavior in which "the Internet becomes the organizing principle of addicts' lives."

But surely, change, one of the key words of this season, is under way! " 'The mode of communication among young people is changing so rapidly that I can't help but surmise that it will change the way they think,' said John Palfrey, a Harvard University law professor and co-author of Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives." ... At George Mason University, professor Peter Prober advised faculty members at a recent brown-bag to limit their sentences to eight words or fewer during lectures, especially in introductory classes."

There are, of course, benefits to texting and celling, especially if one needs to get a ride, or keep track of children. But at what cost? And do the textors control the texting, or does the texting control the textors?

As Julie Zingesser reflected: " 'If I really look into it, I think ... [texting] is affecting my focus and my closeness with my family,' she said. 'Sometimes, ... I'm not 100 percent present.' Still, she doubts she will change her text life anytime soon. 'When I don't have my phone with me, ... I feel out of the loop.'"

Ah, not having a cell phone apparently does make people feel “out of the loop.” Despite the signs in the lobbies here, and other Lehigh Valley synagogues, no one wants to feel “out of the loop” even in our sanctuaries where cell phones have gone off during services, funerals and weddings, as well as at cemetery internments – it is always disconcerting to hear a merry tune as the casket is being lowered. Apparently, there are those who do not want to feel out of the loop even when they endanger others.

On May 8th of this year, reporters Milton J.Valencia and Noah Bierman of The Boston Globe covered a trolley crash. “Saying he was having difficulty containing his outrage, the MBTA’s chief said a trolley driver was text-messaging from his cellphone when he rear-ended another Green Line trolley on Friday night, sending scores of people to the hospital and forcing the closure of the Government Center station. ... Under MBTA policy, a driver can be fired for texting while operating a train, trolley, or bus.” Have I lost all perspective, or does it seem odd that one needs a policy for what would appear to be common sense?

In the July 10, 2009 edition of the Baltimore Sun, Michael Dresser reported: “In the wake of fatal transit accidents across the nation, the Maryland Transit Administration has adopted a zero-tolerance policy under which any bus or train operator found using a cell phone or text-messaging device on the job will be fired, even for a first offense. The MTA took the action ... scrapping a ‘three-strikes-and-you’re-out’ policy and vowing to fire violators outright.” Wow, we put trains and busses into the hands of people who not only did not know on their own that texting and celling while driving might be a problem, but needed to be punished repeatedly to make that point!!!

As of July 2008, “the data continues to pour in showing that cellphones distract drivers as more states are making it illegal to talk on a cellphone without a handsfree device while operating a motor vehicle.

Currently there are laws on the books of five states - California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and Washington, plus the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. These jurisdictions have cell phone laws prohibiting driving while talking on handheld cell phones." There is, of course, some disagreement about the problem with driving and talking on the cellphone. There are many who feel the contents of the conversation is the real problem, not the issue of hands on or off the wheel. Once again, do we rely on people's common sense in the decision of driving and conversing any more than we could depend on the common sense of people driving and eating, or driving and putting a hot cup of coffee between their legs?

As someone who does occasionally deal with matters of life and death and manages with using land lines, I wonder what it is that everyone is talking about on their cell phones or texting each other with. Are we afraid that we will forget a thought? Are all our thoughts that important?

Apparently some of us think that even our most mundane thoughts are of interest to the world at large. Isn't that the basic premise of Twitter? Do we really think that even minor reactions, feelings and activities need to be recorded for history? And what if you twitter a line and ten seconds or ten days or ten years later regret it? Can you make it disappear? Has someone already preserved it for future use against you, even if you have changed your mind or realized that you made a mistake?

The August 25th edition of U.S.A. Today carried an article by Jon Swartz entitled: "Twitter haters see no point in tweeting" with the subheading: "Many resent self-promotion, babble, vanity." ... "Earlier this month, Twitter bashers had another reason to send their tongues wagging: A new study concludes that 40% of tweets are 'pointless babble.'" ... Many bemoan the loss of face-to-face communication among a generation of people glued to their smartphones, netbooks or websites." Interesting that those who use Twitter are

called "tweeters" when it would seem that they might be called "Twits." Was this an intentional word play by the Twitter founders? Is this a generational issue? Is this a social issue that people are lonely and feel unimportant? I do not know, but Facebook, among others, raises the fundamental question about what constitutes not only conversation, but community. I keep hearing that these Internet options allow for reestablishing connections with long lost friends and acquaintances. This is the new way to form social communities. I, for one, do not have enough time to connect with people locally the way I would want. I have no interest in spending time online with my childhood friends and high school buddies and Seminary associates. I look for community at Kiddush, in the Lehigh Valley Clergy Group and even with local, fellow gardeners. I am fine talking on the phone or emailing with my four children. But that is definitely not as good as having them here for yuntiff where I can see them, hug them and kiss them. Aren't we starting to confuse communication with community?

Isn't it interesting that the words "communication" and "community" sound so much alike? The word "commune," when a verb is really a form of communication and as a noun, "commune" a form of community. But I have no interest in blurring the line.

The list of unintended consequences is too long to elaborate in detail. But how many children now play all their sports on the computer? As far back as 2000, The Express-Times reported that William Woods University in Missouri offered "students \$5,000 to log off their computers and log on to life. Worried that students spend too much time surfing the Internet, the liberal arts school ... [offered] new freshmen a tuition rebate for attending campus cultural events or joining organizations." Did we really intend to bring an end to so many newspapers and magazines? Hopefully, we will not whine when mail delivery is reduced to five days or fewer a week. After all, who writes a note or letter today? Even some of our most religious relatives have

called and commented that they no longer send Rosh Hashanah cards, but instead they call.

We have in reality given up our privacy. Phones have cameras and video recording devices and there are separate video recording devices as small as an index finger. With and without our knowledge, total strangers may record us. Within the past two weeks, a twenty-five year old recording of Chris Collinsworth was put on the internet for the sole purpose of embarrassing him. Chris Collinsworth is now a major commentator for professional football. Twenty-five years ago he was asked about his dating habits and he answered in a boorish and crude way. As a twenty year old, he thought his answer was funny.

A few days ago, the President of the United States made an off the record remark about Konye West interrupting an award presentation. "ABC News says it was wrong for its employees to tweet that Obama had called West a "jackass" ... The network said some of its employees had overheard a conversation between the president and CNBC's John Harwood and didn't realize it was considered off the record. The network apologized to the White House and CNBC."

So what do I suggest? Judaism is a tradition that values limits. Be aware of how much time your children or grandchildren are online. Whether you limit what you or they put on line, or limit your time celling and texting and tweeting and Facebooking by the hour or the day, think about some limit for yourself and loved ones, especially children and teens. As time goes on, I value more than ever not using the television, telephone or computer on Shabbat. And if you cannot avoid phones and the computer for one day a week, who is in control – you or the technology? On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate creation and the crown of creation is human beings. There are many ways to share; direct human contact as far as we know is still one of them.

Judaism values community – let's give more thought to what constitutes a community.

I know that times are changing. I was struck by the report on the front page of The Morning Call a few weeks ago when the new Allentown Bishop, John Barres, was installed. He was quoted: " `Now is the time for evangelization, using every means of modern technology at our disposal to spread the Gospel," Barres said, hinting at a new kind of Episcopal leadership in this [Facebook](#)-and-[Twitter](#) age.'" I just wonder if everything can be delivered to your home computer and cellphone, why bother going to church or synagogue?

Once, the belief in one God was new. Once, writing was new. Once, the printing press was new. Once, the pony express was new. Once, the telegraph was new. Once, talking movies were new. Once, the television was new. I know that changes will continue, but the challenge for us as Jews is to remember that we continue to believe that God is one and that may be the only eternal reality of a very long list of changes. And we probably will never be able to email or text God. But that piece of communication I want to explore further on Yom Kippur.

For now, please go home and spend a few minutes talking with each other about whether you control your technology or like Julie Zingeser, you can't live without it.

Shanah tovah!