

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Last November 24th, David Leonhardt wrote an article in the *New York Times* entitled: Turn Off Your Phone for Thanksgiving. The article invited the readers to do something truly revolutionary on Thanksgiving Day: "Turn off your phone, and keep it off for a full 24 hours."

David Leonhardt prefaced his suggestion by describing something all of us know too well: the complex relationship the civilized world has with their smartphones. The author writes:

"...Americans will endure flight delays, traffic jams and other logistical miseries to spend time with family and friends. And when the holiday weekend is ending, many will lament that they don't get to spend enough time with those relatives and friends. But during the weekend itself, these same lamenters will spend a lot of time ignoring the people around them and distractedly staring into their phones. They will get a notification and disappear down a digital rabbit hole of Facebook posts, text messages and fantasy-football updates. They will monitor the comments on the photos they just posted, instead of engaging with the human beings in those photos. Many of us have a complicated relationship with our phones. We enjoy them in the moment. Yet when we reflect on all the time we spend looking at a tiny screen, we feel lousy about it. We pine for a less addictive relationship with the online world."

Then the author proceeds to share how he and his family embraced a Tech Shabbat, 24 hours with no internet. Their experience, in his own words, "was wonderful. We hung out with friends, without distraction. We never had to ask, guiltily, 'Sorry, what'd you say?' because we had been only semi-listening. In between scheduled activities, we took a walk and played a board game... I spent time thinking about long-term projects instead of replying to unimportant emails. It felt productive, rejuvenating and, yes, fun."

The entire article is inspiring. (I encourage you to look for it on the internet and to read it.) I am not sure if David Leonhardt is Jewish or not, but if he is, he is not an observant one. In his article, he is describing the Shabbat experience of thousands of individuals, including myself, Silvia, and our three children – an experience that gives up one type of connectivity experience in order to gain a different, deeper, connectivity experience.

David Leonhardt is reminding all of us of something that is counterintuitive in our Western society: that multitasking doesn't work. If you are checking the phone, you are not connecting with the people around you. If you binge-watch for 4, 5, or 6 hours, then you have 4, 5, or 6 hours less to be with your family, to walk outside, or to do something good for the community.

I am not commenting on the merits of a pre-technological era. Our digital era, with its proliferation of gadgets, has not only made life easier, but is doing wonderful things including saving lives. However, technology is morally neutral. We can use the same smartphone to meet people, to build bridges, to check on loved ones, or to alienate ourselves from people and to neglect family members and friends.

As Jews we were given, and gave the world, the gift of Shabbat. While many people believe that Shabbat is something Jews do Saturday mornings from 9 to 12, the truth is that it is much more. Actually, the most beautiful gift of Shabbat is the one we don't get to see in shul: dinner with family and friends, long walks in the park, reading a good book, reconnecting with our Jewish tradition, taking a refreshing nap, and truly disconnecting from non-stop digital input.

As your rabbi, I am happy to report that traditional observance of Shabbat is not only alive and well, but, as you can see from David Leonhardt's article, it is paving the way for a much needed change in the way we relate to our technological BFF (Best Friends Forever).

If you didn't grow up observant, becoming a *shomer-Shabbat* "cold turkey" might be difficult. However, taking a 25-hour Tech-Shabbat is something you should try. At the beginning you will feel the withdrawal symptoms, but once you realize you can survive without your phone, or Netflix, or internet, then you will start enjoying it, and who knows, you may start doing it more often. Give it a try and let me know how it felt.

I'm looking forward to comparing Shabbat notes with you!

*Rabbi Manes Kogan*