

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5773

I remember my father telling me that he couldn't wait to be thirteen years old to start using long pants. In our grandparents' time, long pants marked the entrance to a short adolescence and a long adulthood that led more mature thirteen years old than the ones today into a productive life of study and work.

This past year, our son Ilan became a Bar Mitzvah and Silvia and I decided to recognize this important milestone in his life with the single most universally accepted ritual of passage to adolescence today: we got Ilan his own iPhone.

Ilan has wanted an iPhone for a while, since most of his close friends had one.

Silvia and I tried to delay the dreaded day, but eventually we gave in. First of all, Ilan is a boy who generally doesn't ask for too much, and second, we realized that a smart-phone, a device with which you can text, Skype and access the Internet (people don't use phones to make calls any longer), is becoming more and more an item of necessity rather than of luxury.

Abby is the only member of our family who doesn't have an active iPhone but she has a on old version of an iPhone that Arnie Schweitzer gave her, with which she can play endless games that she downloads using a Wi-Fi connection (thank you Arnie!).

To say that the use of electronic devices has altered the routine of our family (and millions of families around the world) is an understatement.

Last month, Silvia, the children, and I took a couple of days off and traveled to the Jersey shore to disconnect ourselves from our daily routines and to connect ourselves to Mother Nature and to each other.

To be honest, we are not sure we were able to connect too much among ourselves or with Mother Nature, but our children, Silvia, and I remained connected with our

wonderful electronic devices all throughour short vacation thanks to the three iPhone chargers we took with us.

Welcome to the era of technology, where the world has shrunk to the size of our phones and everyone is always 'connected'.

"Con-nect – verb. To form a relationship with or feel an affinity for someone.

With the advent of new technology our lives should have become progressively simpler, happier and more connected. But is that what is really happening? Seems that the more gadgets we invent to enable us to stay connected, the more disconnected we become.

We might be attending a stimulating lecture, enjoying a night out with friends, yet our hands are tapping out a message.

We could be sitting in a restaurant, soft music in the background, enjoying dinner with our spouse, yet each of us is glued to our respective phones.

*Friends have forgotten how to communicate, to share a laugh. Couples connect through texts and not conversations. Parents spend more quality time with their phones than with their kids. In this technology-immersed and busy era what we need to do is to pause and reflect; for what was supposed to enhance the quality of our lives has diminished it."*¹

The words were borrowed from "a Day to Disconnect" initiative, a worldwide movement, spearheaded by Rabbi Zechariah Wallerstein of Ohr Naava, to encourage thousands of people to voluntarily unplug their gadgets for some time – an hour, two or even all day. ²

An important strategic partner for Ohr Naava's "Day to Disconnect" initiative is "Unplug and Reconnect." Headed by Dr. Joseph Geliebter, *Unplug and Reconnect* is a movement for people to find a balance between their technology-laden selves and their creative, emotional and spiritual needs.

¹ <http://daytodisconnect.com/about-campaign.php>

² <http://daytodisconnect.com/about-campaign.php>

*Unplug & Reconnect was created in response to our current state of digital overload and to rising concerns that the more connected we are technologically, the more we find ourselves isolated and removed from family, friends and even our inner-selves.*³

While I believe most of you would be able to relate to these words, my intention is not to advocate for the return to the pre-smart phones era, which, in any case, is impossible. I also don't believe, like more fundamentalist segments in our Jewish community do, that technology is a necessary evil we need to learn how to live with.

The advent of technology, with its many gadgets, is a wonderful gift, but as wonderful a gift as it is; it is still a tool, not an end in itself, and as a tool it will never provide meaning to our lives.

And speaking of life, as you may know, the word life in Hebrew –*chayim*– exists only in plural. As my friend and colleague Rabbi Baruch Zeilkovich likes to reflect, there is no life in singular, in isolation. Maybe there is existence, but not life. The only possible life is a life of encounter – encounter with others, with our inner selves, and with God.

The problem is that technology is so pervasive that the only way to generate genuine encounters, *genuine connections*, is by allowing these encounters, these connections, to happen; and they are not going to happen unless we make room for them to happen.

The *Day to disconnect* and the Unplug & Reconnect *initiatives* are praiseworthy ones. Even if people dismiss them right now, or underestimate them, our current state of digital overload will sooner or later attract the interest of government and legislators as it starts having negative effects both on learning and productivity.

However, the above initiatives won't address the deeper question of meaning. It is not enough for us to "unplug." We need to have something instead, something that will infuse life into our mere existence.

"What can I do?" is what our children ask Silvia and me when we pull them away from the TV, the computer, or their phones.

³ www.unplugreconnect.com

Silvia tells them that there is something called toys, or friends, or books, or chores, or walks, or crafts, or writing a postcard, or visiting someone who is sick, or volunteering for a couple of hours. The truth is that most of the above choices force us to spend time with others, to spend time with ourselves, and we are not ready; we don't know what to do with our free time.

Like addicts who cannot live deprived of their drugs, we cannot live disconnected from our gadgets because we don't know what to do when we are without them.

This past year I participated in two five-day spiritual retreats run by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality as part of a cohort of 36 rabbis from three different denominations. The retreats, which took us to the middle of nowhere in Southern California and Connecticut, included long periods of silence and meditation. Computers were barred and phones were allowed only for us to be in touch with our immediate families and only during short periods of time throughout the day. The first two out of the five days I was climbing the walls, I didn't know what to do with myself because I wasn't used to being with myself.

While retreats can serve as occasional special opportunities to facilitate encounters with our inner selves, with God, or with our loved ones (in case of family retreats for example), I believe that synagogue life, our synagogue life, has the potential to generate meaningful encounters and to bring meaning to our lives on a regular basis.

Let's start with Shabbat, for example.

What is Shabbat if not a day to "unplug"? However for Shabbat to work, we must explore expanding Shabbat beyond the synagogue walls and beyond two or three hours in the morning. Let's start small, let's start with a Friday night meal around the Shabbat table where we can talk about our past week, about what we learned in school, about something special that happened to us. We can then sing a song, read a Torah story, and linger around the table. We can go for a family walk if the weather permits, either Friday night or Saturday afternoon, or both. We can take a short nap on Shabbat afternoon (or a long one). We can go one step further: we can try to live without TV and without computers for 24 hours. Believe me; you will be able to survive it.

Our society doesn't encourage encounters. Many times we go through life transforming people into instruments for our needs. Synagogue life can help us undo that trend. Here, at our own shul, we can find meaning by learning how to work with others, how to work for others.

What are the many mitzvah initiatives at Hillcrest if not meeting points, if not encounter opportunities? By delivering flowers, visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, knitting for the needy, collecting food and coats, we allow for encounters with others, with the essence of our inner selves, and with God.

And what is Torah study in its many formats if not an attempt to find ourselves in the stories of our ancestors? And what about those of you who found within these walls the loves of your lives, your best friends, or a reason to wake up every morning?

Deep connections are possible, but in order to allow for such connections we must leave our comfort zones. Meaningful encounters won't happen unless we unplug and re-connect. For me to meet you, and for you to meet me, and for us to meet God, and ourselves, we must change, which means to stop doing things the way we were doing them, and start doing them differently.

The High Holy Days, very much like a spiritual retreat, provide us with a unique opportunity to unplug and reconnect, to unplug from an existence of digital isolation and to reconnect to a meaningful life, through meaningful encounters with God, with others and with ourselves.

And so we pray:

Avinu Malkeinu; may this spiritual journey we start today help us be more alive, more truly connected with others, more in sync with our inner core, more attached to You. Give us the courage to leave our comfort zones, help us to begin our journey with small yet firm steps. May the sound of the shofar lead us in the right direction and may it be Your will to bless us, our families and our loved ones with a good, sweet, healthy and meaningful year.