

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center
Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

(Thanks to Rabbi Fabian Werbin for the sharing the "selfie" imagery with me and to Rabbi Baruch Zeilicovich for reminding me that there is no "selfie" Judaism)

5775

As you know, Silvia and I live far away from our respective parents and our three children have grown having little contact with their grandparents, cousins, uncles and great-uncles. To compensate somehow for their lack -our lack- of intimate family connection, we decided to display in our dining room old family pictures.

I love old family pictures.

All I needed was to show some interest in the origin of my family to become the recipient of boxes and more boxes of old pictures, letters, documents and other family memorabilia. The possession of this unwanted treasure made me also the unofficial family historian.

Hanging on our dining room walls, we have grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and all the relatives in between; my side, Silvia's side, small pictures, large pictures, a few color ones, mostly black-and-white, over 75 pictures in total.



Having the photographs in the dining room provides Silvia and I with a wonderful opportunity to tell our children about their ancestors, about their stories and their journeys.

If you have old pictures at home, you will notice that many of them were taken during family gatherings. When my parents and grandparents were young very few

people owned their own cameras. Years ago, if you wanted to get your picture taken you went to a photography studio, you got dressed for the occasion, and you took your family with you. Old pictures are scarce and in this sense I feel very fortunate to have a few of them at hand.

Most old black-and-white photographs were taken by professionals and they usually depict groups of people: couples, large families or even a large group of friends in social gatherings.

Then in the 1930s and 1940s Leica, Kodak and Canon opened the world of photography to everybody. Families started owning their own cameras, and as many of you remember, you needed to buy the film and then send it to be developed. After waiting for a few days, you got your pictures back, and if you were a "quality" photographer like me, you needed a lot of praying just to get a few decent ones out of the 36 pictures you took. Needless to say, you needed to pay for all of them, the good and the bad ones. Of course, it was people like me who welcomed digital cameras with excitement.

As you know, one of the fascinating advantages of digital photography –which by the way, is the only photography my children know about- is that you can take as many pictures as you want, thousands of them if you wish, and discard the ones you don't like. You just delete them. Also, people rarely print their digital photographs today since there are faster and more efficient ways to share them.

One of the most recent innovative aspects of digital photography technology, however, is the arrival of the "selfie."

A "selfie," as its name describes it, is a self-taken photograph. New cameras, and especially smart phones and tablets, allow you to reverse the camera in order to take a photograph of yourself. Basically, you hold the phone in your hand, you look at yourself, and you shoot (click, click, click, click).

When I am bored, or relaxed, or both, I take selfies. Smoking a cigar –click. Reading a book – click. Tying my bowtie – click. Click. Click, click. Then, I send the pictures to my parents, or my children or I post them on Facebook for everybody to see.

Now, as many of you know, not all the "selfies" are "pure" selfies. You can take a "selfie" of you and someone else. Thus I have "selfies" of me and Silvia, me and

Ilan, me and Daniela, me and Abby, me and Rabbi Fryer Bodzin, me and Rabbi Wise, and me and the Statue of Liberty. What all the “selfies” have in common, is me.ⁱ



You probably remember the controversial “selfie” that a jovial President Obama took with a cell phone with his seat-mate, Denmark's Prime Minister Helle Thorning, at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Michelle Obama by the way didn't like that “selfie” so much.

“Selfies” can come in very handy if you meet famous people. Famous people don't have too much time or patience for you to find a professional or even an amateur photographer to take your picture with them. However, “selfies” are very quick. “May I take a quick picture with you?” Click, click, click. I took a “selfie” with Elie Wiesel, and with Natan Scharansky, but my hope is to come across Messi or Pope Francis in order to use my “selfie” experience and have a picture taken with them.

And speaking of the Pope, many of my Argentinean colleagues actually took “selfies” with Pope Francis, which they immediately posted on Facebook, arousing the jealousy of many rabbis, including myself.

How many people can you fit in a “selfie”?

That actually depends on the length of your arm. The longer your arm, the more people you can fit. However the number is usually limited: two, three, not more than four. This past summer, during our short vacation, Silvia and I encountered a tourist who had an “extension-arm” for his cell-phone, which allowed him to take better and more inclusive “selfies.”



Now, “selfies” are “selfies” in a double way: first of all, the one who takes the photograph is always in the picture. Selfies are about me or me and someone else, but in the end, always about me.

“Selfies” are also self-sufficient photographs. I don’t need you to take my picture. I am the one who takes the picture, and I am the one in the picture. Do you picture it?

Years ago, if I wanted my picture to be taken, I needed to ask someone else to help me: “Sir, can you please take a picture of us?” Not anymore. Now I can do it myself. I don’t need to ask for favors. It begins with me and it ends with me. Since not many people fit in a “selfie,” large family photographs, like the ones hanging in my dining room are very rare these days.

We live in a “selfie” time.

Interestingly enough, “selfie” defines not only a photograph, but a lifestyle. On Facebook, we need to be “liked,” on Twitter we want to be “followed.” Our social worth is defined by how many “friends” we have and how many likes our “selfies” get. Being a follower or liking others is insignificant. You only “exist” if you are at the center of the action, at the center of the picture.

In a time of “selfies,” I don’t need a community, or I need it only as a crowd of admirers, followers, and likers. Counter-paraphrasing President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, in a time of “selfies” I don’t ask what I can do for others but what can everybody else do for me. “What do I get for my membership?” is a commonly asked question by prospective members who “shop” for shuls.

And it is precisely because we live in a “selfie” time that community life becomes so vital, so essential.

Community life invites all of us to return to the old picture, to the larger picture where you need others and others need you. Congregational pictures, for example, don't include only you and your little group of self-sufficient identicals, but also those who are different, those who are in need. Community life requires the inclusion of more than one, two or three people in our pictures; community life requires reaching out to others and others reaching out to us.

In this regard, Hillcrest Jewish Center strives to be countercultural. We strive to transform selfies into givers, individuals eager to be liked and followed into kinder human beings, ready to love others, to follow and pursue ideals bigger than themselves.

You can only be Jewish as part of a community: a community of learners, a community of seekers, a community of givers.

The challenge for all of us is to expand our circle, to enlarge our pictures. If you live in a photograph of one, two or three, try this coming year to invite a few more to be part of your picture. If you grew up in a time of "each congregation for itself," try to think of Hillcrest as part of a larger Jewish community, at least in Queens. If your picture revolves around material achievements and social success, try to bring God into that picture and experience how your life is being transformed.

We live indeed in "selfie" times but we shouldn't be proud of it.

Since our society focuses more and more on the individual, on the self, it is not going to be easy to revert from the "selfie" trend. Everything is tailored to fit the needs of the individual consumer, including, I am afraid, spiritual consumers.

However, this adverse reality should make congregational life even more relevant than before. The truth being told is that there is no meaning in a "selfie" life, and sooner or later, people thirsty for meaning will be knocking at our door. As a matter of fact they are knocking at our door right now.

We are all seekers. As Viktor Frankl taught us,ⁱⁱ we are all in search of meaning, whether we know it or not; and what better and more sublime goal for our shul than to provide opportunities for all of us to overcome our "selfie" instinct and to become nobler, kinder, and more sensitive human beings.

Maybe I can set my camera in a self-timer function and take a picture that will include all of us. Maybe there is a way for us to think of ways to include those who didn't make it today, those out there who are waiting to be included in our picture. Maybe I can think of a way to bring God into my little picture as I think about how I fit in God's big picture.

And so we pray,

Master of the Universe: help us to transcend our "selfie" lives, our solitary, selfish experience. Help us find our unique place in the big picture of life by including others in our small pictures. Teach us to follow Your path by becoming givers, by transforming ourselves into sensitive and compassionate human beings.

As we promise to become a source of blessing to others, we ask You, God, to bless all of us with health and peace, with a good and meaningful sweet year.

Amen.

ⁱ Thank you Jenny Sarkani for these two links you shared with me after Rosh Hashanah. I am sure people will find them very meaningful.

<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152753344339769>

<http://vimeo.com/106807552>

ⁱⁱ Frankl, Viktor: Man's Search for Meaning. An Introduction to Logotherapy, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 2006.