

## **Be Present, Be Kind, & Lift Up Your Eyes**

Over the summer I came across a commercial on TV for T-Mobile. The brief spot was of a young couple who had managed to escape the noise of Manhattan for a weekend getaway in the woods. After successfully putting up a tent and getting ready for some peace and quiet, the following conversation ensued:

*"We did it! they say. "We're campers!"*

*It's so nice to get out of the city! the woman exclaims.*

*It's SO quiet... her husband responds.*

*Is it **too** quiet, the woman asks? "It's awful..." he replies.*

But thankfully, all was not lost. After 18 seconds of quiet, and togetherness, free from the stresses of the big city (and perhaps, their children), the couple was able to pull out their smart phone and download an app to hear the sounds of Manhattan's hustle and bustle, and get a good night's sleep!

Thank goodness for T-mobile's service in the middle of nowhere!

As I watched this commercial, I couldn't help but wonder whether there was not something seriously wrong with this message. I was clearly taking this

commercial too seriously, but I wondered whether or not it was indicative of a larger problem that we seem to be having as a society.

Have we forgotten how to exist in the moment? Have we forgotten how to spend quiet time alone, or with loved ones? Have we become so addicted to our technology that we no longer know how to simply exist in the present? We eat with our phones, we exercise with our phones, we drive with our phones, we go to sleep with our phones, and yes-we even go to the bathroom with our phones. Do we remember how to be alone with ourselves? More importantly, **do we remember what it is to have a real conversation with someone anymore?** What has this digital revolution of the past decade done to us and how has it affected our ability to be in relationship with one another?

Anyone who knows me is aware that I, like many of you, struggle with this tension. I too love my smart phone, use it 24/6 (did you catch that?), text, post, snap pictures, like everyone else. So perhaps, as Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussaf movement used to say: "I am preaching to myself aloud, (but) if what I am telling myself is of use to you, then please use it."

A few moments ago our Hazan finished chanting the Hinneni prayer.

**Hinneni**- here I am. Say it after me- "Hinneni."

It is a simple word which in many ways lies at the heart of the work that we are to do on these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe. Hinneni is all about presence. It is all about existing in the moment, free of distraction, fully focused on the task at hand.

Hinneni is the phrase used for the Hazan to indicate that he is present, in this moment, with us and with God. And it is the phrase used when Abraham responds to God's call to sacrifice Isaac in our Torah portion this morning. By responding with the word Hinneni, Abraham is signaling to God that he is paying attention; that he is present with God even in the most difficult of circumstances. Hinneni is the word used at the beginning of this utterly challenging biblical story, and it is the word used at the end, when the angel of God calls out to stop Abraham from "raising a hand" against his son and Abraham responds by saying "Hinneni;" here I am, present, focused, just in time.

We start out the new year by reminding ourselves of the importance of presence as a value in our lives. From the central Hinneni prayer in our liturgy, to the Hinneni moments in our Torah reading, the message is that these High Holidays are all about presence. The work of teshuvah,

repentance, healing, and forgiveness, also involves presence with one another. Teshuvah demands conversation. A text, tweet, or facebook apology doesn't count. We all know that mending a relationships takes face to face connection whenever possible. It takes human interaction. It takes emotion, eye contact, hugs, tears, and all that comes along with truly opening our hearts to those with whom we seek to make amends.

But my friends, we are at risk of losing the tools to engage in these very types of moments with one another. We have forgotten how to turn towards one another, to face one another, to look up and see one another, to talk to one another, and to be present with one another. We have forgotten how to have conversations with one another. It is hurting our relationships. It is making us less caring, compassionate, and kind as individuals. It is hurting our society and it is hurting our souls.

Am I over exaggerating? I am not so sure.

This summer, I read a book written by Dr. Sherry Turkle entitled "*Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk In A Digital Age*". Dr. Turkle is a sociologist, a clinical psychologist, and a professor at MIT who has spent much of her career writing and thinking about the intersections between the modern technological revolution and human interaction. Her book does not argue for

a move away from the digital age in any way, but rather seeks to help us figure out how to live more healthy, thoughtful, and meaningful lives as we go deeper and deeper into the technological future.

Turkle writes:

"We say we turn to our phones when we're "bored." And we often find ourselves bored because we have become accustomed to constant feed of connection, information, and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere. At class, or at church or business meetings, we pay attention to what interests us and then when it doesn't, we look to our devices to find something that does. There is now a word in the dictionary called "phubbing." It means maintaining eye contact while texting. My students tell me they do it all the time and it's not that hard.

We begin to think of ourselves as a tribe of one, loyal to our own party. We check our messages during a quiet moment or when the pull of the online world simply feels irresistible. Even children text each other rather than talk face-to face with friends- or, for that matter, rather than daydream, where they can take time alone with their thoughts.

It all adds up to a flight from conversation- at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations where empathy and intimacy flourish and social action gains strength..... We have learned that even a silent phone inhibits conversations that matter. **The very sight of a phone** on the landscape leaves us feeling less connected to each other, less invested in each other. (4)

Perhaps the most challenging part of all of this is that our lack of true presence and connection to one another is actually affecting our empathy. Have you noticed the anger that seems to be pervasive? Have you noticed that people are not as kind and gentle as they could be with one another? People aren't talking with one another and, according to Turkle, that is directly correlated to a societal decrease in empathy.

In an interview in November of 2015 on PBS, Dr.Turkle explained:

“It’s that feeling that we all are always potentially elsewhere that is cutting us off. And we’re finding ways around conversation, the kind of conversation that’s open-ended, where you give time for another person to sort of take a tangent and not go to a phone if there’s a little bit of a lapse.

And those are the kinds of conversations where empathy is born, where intimacy is born. And those are the conversations we're not having with each other and with our kids.

**There's a 40 percent decline in all markers for empathy among college students, with most of it taking place in the past 10 years.** That's not OK.... we need to talk to each because it's in conversation, the most human and humanizing thing that we do, that empathy is born, that intimacy is born, that relationship is born.

...If you're using technology in a way that opens out conversation in your family, with your friends, with people you care about, I'm for that. But if you're using technology to silence the conversations with the people around you, then you have to create sacred spaces in your home, the kitchen, the dining room, the car.

It should also be pointed out that our increase in screen time and smartphone use is not only causing a decrease in empathy, and a decrease in actual conversation, there is real evidence that it is causing some serious damage to our mental health, particularly for young people. A recent article in *The Atlantic*, cited research that clearly demonstrated that:

*"Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.*

*There's not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness...*

And when it comes to the importance of conversation, this research demonstrated that:

*The opposite is true of in-person interactions. Those who spend an above-average amount of time with their friends in person are 20 percent less likely to say they're unhappy than those who hang out for a below-average amount of time.*

*If you were going to give advice for a happy adolescence based on this survey, it would be straightforward: Put down the phone, turn off the laptop, and do something—anything—that does not involve a screen.*

**<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>**



And of course, it's not just a problem with "kids today." Let's do a quick survey to see if I am completely off here. When was the last time that you went somewhere with your smartphone out of reach? How did that make you feel? How many of you brought your phones into synagogue this morning? Now ask yourself- why did you do that? Absent real emergencies or an absolute need to be in contact with someone for the few hours that you are here this morning, why is your phone with you? And how many times have you "checked" to see what you have missed (under your machzor, in the lobby, or outside- when the rabbi wasn't looking, of course!)?

Have we forgotten how to be alone with our thoughts? Have we forgotten how to be present with one another? Have we forgotten how to be present, alone, with our community, with or God? Please don't mishear me. In many ways our technology is incredible, and yes, it can also act as a true connector between people. It is not the technology that is the problem.

It is us.

We have forgotten how to be present.

We have moved away from our Hinneni moments.

And we need to do teshuvah- we need to return. We need to return to ourselves and to our loved ones. We need to return to one another.

Okay. But how. What concrete things can we do to recommit ourselves to one another, to reconnect with one another in deep, meaningful, and substantive ways?

Turkle gives a lot of suggestions in her book. Allow me to highlight a few and then add a few of my own.

(1) Slow down. As we say in Hebrew *"l'at l'at."* Take things a small dose at a time. Most of us are moving too fast. We cannot focus on conversation and presence because our brain is operating at too high of a speed. Slow down. Breathe. Try being alone with your thoughts, or focusing on the person in front of you. Be conscious about it and practice. For me, this one is a constant work in progress. (319)

(2) Set aside the phone whenever possible. In particular, Turkle urges us to avoid devices at meals, in the kitchen, or in the car. For those of us with younger children, this last one is tricky. How I love the quiet that comes from the long car rides when we permit "device time." But at what cost?

(320) I would add, that you should try to avoid phones in the bedroom (we really don't need to go to sleep and wake up to our devices). And yes,

research does show that the lighting from our screens has a negative effect on our sleep if we look at our phones one hour prior to going to bed.

Instead of going to sleep and waking up with our phones- try going to sleep and waking up with a prayer book. Say the *Shema*, or the *Modeh Ani* and see how that changes your daily life. You could also try putting your phones away for part of Shabbat each week. It really does help. As a challenge, try leaving your phone in the car the next time you walk into the synagogue- on Shabbat, for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or throughout these High Holidays. See if you can do it.

(3) Try focusing on doing one thing at a time. According to Turkle, we have become conditioned to multitasking -- but research now shows that multitasking actually degrades performance. Unitasking is the key to productivity and creativity, and conversation is a way to practice doing one thing at a time. (321) As the rabbis in the Talmud once said: "*Tafasta merubah lo tafastah.*" If you try to grab too much of something, if you try to do too much at once, nothing will be accomplished. If you try to have a conversation, while texting, posting, and answering the phone- good luck. But, "*Tafasta mu'at tafastah,*" but if you try to grab a small amount, if you strive to have a conversation that is focused on only one person; in which you are only doing one thing- being present, you will likely have more success.

(4) No phones for the first seven minutes of a conversation. Research has shown that it takes seven minutes to see how a conversation is going to unfold (322). Let it play out. See what happens. Challenge yourself to be fully present with your spouse, your parents, your kids, your friends. And call each other out, gently and nicely, when you see one another slipping.

(5) Stop trying to have meaningful and serious conversations on social media. It just doesn't work. Instead, aim for person to person conversations- on the phone or in person whenever possible. The ranting and raging on facebook, instagram, twitter, is out of control. If you participate in this on occasion, challenge yourself to stop. Today. Try this trick- don't post anything that you wouldn't say directly to the person that you posted to. And if you feel that you have to respond to a post- try doing so in person. Try actually calling your "friend," or inviting them to talk, and seeing how the conversation plays out. Work on listening and not trying to prove your point. It's easy to have a conversation with someone you agree with. Challenge yourself to have the conversation with someone you disagree with.

We must challenge ourselves to be more empathetic towards one another, to be more patient with one another, and to be kind to one another.

We must challenge ourselves to do two things this year- **Be present and be kind. That's it.** That's the teshuvah that we, as individuals and as a society, must strive for in 5778.

So here is my gift and my challenge to each of you. We'll call it "The Hinneni challenge." The challenge of saying I am here. I am present. I am ready to remember how to listen, how to talk, and how to care.

I have fifty Starbucks cards that I want to give out to the first fifty of you ready to take this challenge. I want you to find someone that you don't know very well and I want you to take them out for coffee at Starbucks, on me. There is only one rule- no phones, ipads, apple watches, or other electronic devices. The goal is to get to know one another, to reconnect with one another on a deeper level by having an actual conversation. Practice being present with one another. Have a nice slow, relaxed conversation with one another. Talk about your families. Talk about your work. Talk about politics. Talk about your Judaism. Talk about this sermon. It doesn't really matter- just talk.

The first fifty of you to come to me, get ten dollars towards two drinks at Starbucks on me. Email me, call, or come into the office this week to take

advantage of this opportunity. If there are cards left on Yom Kippur, I will let you know. If you are a tween, teen, or college student and you want in on this- I will give you a card regardless of whether or not the first fifty are gone. We all need practice at this, but I want to make sure that you, in particular, are able to participate.

My friends, I realize that what I am asking may seem funny, or countercultural, or uncomfortable, or hard. I also realize that many of us in this room are both amazed and challenged by this incredible digital age in which we find ourselves. But nevertheless, we must strive to reclaim the power of presence with one another. We must engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, a searching of our souls, to see if we are living up to our best selves when it comes to our ability to be present, and kind with one another. We must learn from those in this room, who may be slightly older and wiser and who seem to have a relatively easy time having an how to have an actual focused, relaxed, and empathic conversation. Let their example, be our guide.

Towards the end our Torah reading this morning, we read:

Then the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham, Abraham, and Abraham answered: Hinneni. Here I am. I am present in this moment....

וַיִּשָׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּבְהִינָה אֵיל אַחֵר נֶאֱמָר

בַּסֶּבֶךְ בְּקִשְׁיוֹ הִלֵּךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֵלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ

**When Abraham looked up, when he lifted up his eyes-** *he saw* the ram, *the answer* to all of his problems. (Genesis 22:11-13)

My friends, (*hold phone in your hand*) it is time for us to stop looking down all of the time. It is time for us to say "Hinneni," to look up, and to reclaim our relationships with strangers, friends, and loved ones.

Let us strive to be present. Let us open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to each other. It is not too late. We can do *teshuva*. We can turn this around. All we have to do, is turn back towards one another.

*L'shanah Tovah U'metukah*. May this be a good and sweet New Year. A year of health, happiness, and of true connection with one another.