

**AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH**  
**YOM KIPPUR 5778**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

Fake news – alternative facts. A polarized society where truth is in dispute, one side refusing to believe what the other puts forth because we no longer share a common reality. Compromise now a dirty word. The impossibility of coming to consensus because we can't agree on the basics -- who we are as a country, what values we hold dear, who holds our best interests at heart. How did we get to this point in this country?

To understand, I think we need to go back a few decades. Thirty years ago, NYU communications professor Neil Postman wrote a groundbreaking book about television called *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. This book is prophetic, and it is one of the reasons I finally decided to leave the television profession. There have been many studies detailing the problematic effects of TV viewing: it shortens our attention span, takes away precious time we could be spending with our family and friends, desensitizes us to violence, short circuits our creativity and initiative, is bad for our health as we become couch potatoes. But Postman's contribution goes further and explains why so many have lost the ability to think critically, to distinguish fact from fiction, and to become so increasingly isolated from one another. For Postman, it really all comes down to the shift from reading to watching television.

The written word, he says, is based on reasoning and logic.<sup>1</sup> When you read something, “[y]ou try to “uncover lies...detect abuses of logic and common sense...[and] weigh ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Television, on the other hand, is based on images, and images appeal to our emotions, not our intellect. You can't argue with an image.<sup>3</sup> Images offer “fascination in place of complexity and coherence.” And for Postman there's the rub: “television offers viewers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification...”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “Thinking does not play well on television.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P. 21

<sup>2</sup> P. 51

<sup>3</sup> P. 73

<sup>4</sup> PP. 86-7

Television “is a medium which presents information...simplistically... [and without context]; that is to say information that is packaged as entertainment.”<sup>6</sup> The “problem,” says Postman, “is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining...”<sup>7</sup>

Postman warns that we shouldn’t be afraid about George Orwell’s novel *1984* which predicted that Big Brother would control our lives. Rather, he says, we should worry about Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*: “Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance...Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture...Huxley feared...that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism...”<sup>8</sup> We need not worry about books being banned or burned because television simply makes books irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> And this is indeed what has happened. In short, thanks to television, we have been amusing ourselves to death.

I will add one more effect of television: Television has separated us from each other as we have cocooned more and more into the safety of our homes rather than engage with each other in real time. And the less we engage with each other, the more we rely on what comes out of the boob tube for our understanding of reality.

Postman wrote his book before streaming media engaged us in binge viewing, before laptops, iPads, smart phones or computer wrist watches. Before Facebook and Snapchat and Reddit and Instagram. But what he says about television is only exponentially more so today because of these devices.

Now, I will admit that I am a bit of a Luddite, so I am not one to celebrate the gains of technology. Rather, I worry about what technology has done, and is continuing to do to us. If television serves mainly to titillate rather than to educate, we are now far more distracted by the information coming at us at a dizzying pace from all sorts of newfangled technology.

---

<sup>5</sup> P. 90

<sup>6</sup> P. 141

<sup>7</sup> Pp. 86-7

<sup>8</sup> P. ix

<sup>9</sup> P. 141

Thirty years ago, Postman asked: How many of us have actually changed our behavior because of something we have seen on TV; or taken significant action as a result of a news item or a disturbing documentary? Are we any more active today now that all kinds of information is at our fingertips? In the end, is our engagement in civic culture much more than another form of amusement?

In a recent *New York Times* Op Ed, political science professor EITAN HERSH writes: “Americans who live in relative comfort are emotionally invested in politics, especially after the election, but in a degraded form of politics that caters to the voyeurism of news junkies and the short attention spans of slacktivists. They are engaging in a phenomenon I call ‘political hobbyism.’ They desperately want to do something, but not something that is boring, demanding or slow. Political hobbyists want easy ways to register their feelings...Now it is the Facebooker who argues with friends of friends he does not know; the news consumer who spends hours watching cable; the repeat online petitioner who demands actions like impeaching the president; the news sharer willing to spread misinformation and rumor because it feels good; the data junkie who frantically toggles between horse races in suburban Georgia and horse races in Britain and France...What is really motivating this behavior is hobbyism — the regular use of free time to engage in politics as a leisure activity. Political hobbyism is everywhere.”<sup>10</sup> And all from the comfort of our living room couch.

So we must ask: Is the time we take signing petitions online at the touch of a button just a feel-good mechanism that accomplishes little of real value? Are we just being lulled into complacency, thinking we are actually being proactive when we are really just playing at it? And as we sit behind our computer screen, or our iPad, or our smartphone, have we broadened our horizons with all the information that is out there? Don't we just mine for material and people who support our already held views? Don't we just cheer each other on in echo chambers that insulate us from exposure to the other side? Isn't it easier -- and more fun -- to live in a silo with people who agree with us? After all, at the touch of a button, we can unfriend anyone who disagrees.

---

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/opinion/sunday/the-problem-with-participatory-democracy-is-the-participants.html?emc=edit\\_ty\\_20170703&nl=opinion-today&nid=22082835&te=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/opinion/sunday/the-problem-with-participatory-democracy-is-the-participants.html?emc=edit_ty_20170703&nl=opinion-today&nid=22082835&te=1)

How do we expand the discourse to include multiple points of view when we click an emoji in response to a Facebook posting, communicate in 140 characters through Twitter, or send out an image on Instagram? When we do not actually speak to each other in the flesh and engage in conversation, when we do not take the time to read and dissect arguments, it is that much easier to label and paint the other person with a broad brush, to see the other as an ideology rather than as a complex human being. I include myself in these questions.

So how do we find a way to reach across the cyber divide, across the vast chasm that exists in America today? Because we must come out of our silos, we must not fear differing perspectives from our own.

You might be surprised to hear that I believe Judaism has an answer to this dilemma. I realize that technology is here to stay. But we can also take a break from it. Shabbat is a perfect mechanism for doing that. One of the readings for today is the story of Creation, where God takes the 7th day to rest. Rabbi Rachel Barenblat translates God's rest -- va-yinafash-- as to "re-ensoul" – the literal meaning of the Hebrew. Shabbat is the day when we can turn off all the electronic devices and pick up a book and read! It is also a day when we can engage, not screen-to-screen, but face-to-face with another human being. Or as *New York Times* Op Ed columnist Thomas Friedman puts it, "In a healthy community people...are getting out of Facebook and into each other's faces." In Judaism, in fact, the face of the other is the key to connection.

For the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, the face of the other reminds me of my radical responsibility towards him or her. The Talmud tells this story: A rabbi once asked his students, "How do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" One student answered: "When I look out at the fields and I can distinguish my field from the field of my neighbor, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A second student suggested: "When I can see a house and I can tell it's mine and not my neighbor's." A third student offered: "When I can distinguish the animals in the yard and tell a cow from a horse, that's when the night has ended." "No, no," responded the rabbi, none of you understands. You seem to only divide: one animal from another, one house from another. Isn't our world broken enough? Isn't our world split into enough

fragments? The Torah wants so much more from us. Rather, when you look into the face of the person beside you and you can see that that person is your brother or sister, then finally the night has ended and the day has begun.”

My friends, this is our job now – to see one another as brother and sister. It is time we sat down and really listened to one another, to really see one another, to really hear one another -- no matter how much we disagree. To that end, I have initiated two projects. One is a listening campaign whereby I and other members of my team want to hear from you about what is important to you. You may have gotten, or will get, a phone call or an email. Please also let me know if you would like to participate. This is not a political endeavor. This is about how you would like to make the world around you a better place. Also, this afternoon, from 1 to 4, I am bringing in Rabbi Melissa Weintraub, whose specialty is helping us speak across the divide. She will guide us this afternoon to help us have a dialogue. Please join us. We need to begin to find common ground.

Our Talmud encourages us to disagree, but to still respect and love one another. As you know, there are always many opinions included in a Talmud discussion. The disagreements are considered *b'shem shamayim* -- for the sake of heaven. The two quintessential schools of disagreement are Hillel and Shammai. With regard to the Chanukah menorah, for example, Shammai says that eight candles should be lit the first night, seven the second and so on. Hillel says only one should be lit the first night, two the second, and so on. But even when they disagreed on really fundamental matters such as marriage and personal status – the equivalent of who is a Jew -- their arguments were never personal<sup>11</sup> and they still married one another.

In particular, Beit Hillel studied the opinions of Beit Shammai, giving them serious consideration, and placed Beit Shammai's arguments before their own.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna (1889-1969, Lithuania/Israel), *Daliyot Yechezkel*, 309-10. From Howard Kaminsky's "Constructive Conflict in Jewish Tradition: *Machloket L'shem Shamayim*, 'A Dispute for the Sake of Heaven.'"Pardes.org.il

<sup>12</sup> From Kaminsky's piece.

Let us try and do the same. Let us hear each other out.  
Let us find common ground. Let us not continue amusing ourselves to death.