

**AVATAR, AKEDAH AND TECHNOLOGY SERMON**  
**High Holy Days 5771**  
**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

We have seen the future and it is – Avatar? Last year’s Oscar nominated blockbuster offers a glimpse into life in the year 2154. A greedy corporation wants to mine a precious material substance called unobtanium which is lodged under a sacred tree on the planet Pandora. In order to get access to this invaluable mineral, human beings must contend with the Pandora natives, the Na’vi, a race of blue-skinned, giant humanoids who are not predisposed to negotiate. Enter a new technology that creates human/Na’vi hybrids. These blue giants look like the natives, but are animated remotely by human brains. They are avatars, used to infiltrate the Na’vi population in an effort to convince them, by persuasion or by force, to give up the unobtanium.

The hero of the film is one of these avatars. The brain behind this avatar is Jake, a paraplegic ex-Marine who is thrilled to have the use of his extra-long legs in his avatar reality. In that reality, he also falls in love with one of the native Na’vi. This leads him to muse: “Out there” – in avatar country – “is the true world.” “In here” – in his human body—“is the dream... I don’t know who I am.” At the end of the film, Jake makes a radical choice: to transfer the animating life force in his human body to that of the avatar, so that he can live happily ever after as his virtual self on the planet Pandora with his Pandoran love.

The director James Cameron’s imagined future is not so terribly far-fetched. Go on the Internet and you will find all sorts of possibilities for entering chat rooms in which you can create your own virtual world. Listen to a few descriptions of actual sites. One is called:

--- **Virtual Ibiza**: "Virtual Ibiza.com is your gateway to the coolest community on the Web. A 3-d world based on the hedonistic and totally fun filled island of Ibiza. Choose a character then communicate with like minded people from all over the globe."

Another site is called:

-- **Whyville** : "Whyville is a virtual world where boys and girls from all over the real world come to chat, play, learn, and have fun together. You design your face,

earn clams by playing games, hang out at the beach, and go to town events at the Greek Theater. You can start your own business, buy a car and give your friends a ride, or write for the town newspaper with your own avatar.”

Finally, a third site is called:

--**Friends Hangout.com**: “Now You Can Create Your OWN Virtual World-not just a room or a house, but an entire planet! Your avatar is also another fun part of the whole environment setup. You can give your avatar the sort of look you'd never dare to wear in real life. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to switch lifestyles at the touch of a button? This is exactly what our virtual world allows you to do.”

This may sound like a lot of fun, but I also find it very scary. Virtual worlds, hosting virtual people, connecting through cyberspace. I worry about what values this kind of activity promotes, what kind of relationships develop, and what happens to the interaction between real people, in real time, in the real world? What happens to our concern for others? To our empathy? Our compassion?

On Rosh Hashana, we read the story of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac. When Abraham lifts the knife, and is about to plunge it into the chest of his beloved son Isaac, what makes him finally come to his senses and refrain from committing this act of unspeakable violence? The Torah tells us that he hears the voice of the angel calling out to him: “Abraham, Abraham!” But why does he obey the angel rather than pursue God’s command?

I believe it is because he finally looks into the face of his son, really looks, and really sees him -- a vulnerable human being. As French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas tells us, by seeing the face of the other, we recognize our radical responsibility towards him. Indeed, how could Abraham not realize his obligation to protect his son when he looks down and sees Isaac’s terrified eyes and his beseeching mouth?

Seeing each other face to face also allows two brothers in the Torah to reconcile after a 20-year rift. Jacob fled after his twin brother, Esau, threatened to kill him for stealing his birthright. When the brothers meet up again, many years later, Jacob tells Esau: “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” Indeed Jewish philosopher Martin Buber explains that we get a glimpse of God in our authentic

encounters with other human beings. Seeing one another, experiencing each other in very real terms -- this is what makes for true communities of caring individuals. This is why I am very uncomfortable with the growing use of technology as the primary means to connect, particularly among young adults.

Now, I will admit, I may be completely wrong. I may be just another member of the generation called “digital immigrants” who understands little about the world of the younger generation called “digital natives.” I don’t text and I do not own an iPhone or a Blackberry. I am on “Facebook” and, between that and email I find that I am tied enough to my computer– I don’t want one more device chaining me to technology or distracting me from what is going on in real time and in real space. I don’t want to check my email all day long, or text constantly. I want to pay attention to the person whose presence I am in. This is certainly an anachronism and I may well be missing out on expanding my consciousness and my social network.

On the other hand, recent studies have not been so sanguine about the impact of all these new devices. According to a recent article in [The New York Times](#), scientists say that simultaneously juggling massive amounts of incoming information from a variety of electronic sources can change how people think and behave – and not necessarily for the better. They say that our ability to focus is being undermined. The stimulation from bursts of information that are continually coming at us provokes excitement that can be addictive and, in its absence, people end up feeling bored. The result can be deadly, as when drivers and train engineers are occupied with their cell phones rather than the road. Perhaps less obvious, but no less disturbing, this kind of addiction can cause problems in terms of creativity, and in terms of family life.

Take the Campbells who live in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> Kord Campbell is a software entrepreneur. At his desk, he surrounds himself with an electronic flood from two computer screens flashing email, instant messages, online chats and a Web browser. He goes to sleep with a laptop and a cell phone on his chest. He goes online as soon as he awakes, eating breakfast while typing on the iPad by his side. When he tries to unhook from these electronic gadgets, he craves their stimulation, forgetting things like dinner plans. He also has trouble focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> From the NY Times.

his family. His wife Brenda complains: "It seems like he can no longer be fully in the moment."

Major spats have arisen between the Campbells because Kord often escapes into video games when they are going through tough emotional times. He has trouble putting away his gadgets when the family goes on vacation, and knows exactly how many seconds he will be offline when the subway goes through the tunnel en route to San Francisco. He has burned hamburgers on the grill, forgotten to pick up his children, and lingered in the bathroom playing video games on his iPhone. "I would love for him to totally unplug, to be totally engaged," says his wife. "But...technology is part of the fabric of who he is." Kord himself admits: "It's a mixed blessing. If you're not careful, your marriage can fall apart or your kids can be ready to play and you'll get distracted."

The Campbells' 16-year-old son, Connor, has suffered in school because of his own addiction to technology. At his desk, he gets distracted by two monitors, one with his music collection, the other with Facebook and another social site, Reddit. Then there is his iPhone. When he tries to study, Connor says, "a little voice would be saying, 'Look up' at the computer, and I'd look up." "Normally, I'd say I want to only read for a few minutes, but I [end up searching] every corner of Reddit and then check Facebook."

While many people claim that multitasking makes them more productive, research shows otherwise. Heavy multitaskers have trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information. And they experience more stress. And here is a particularly disturbing finding. Clifford Nass, a communication professor at Stanford University, says that the ultimate risk of heavy technology use is that it diminishes empathy by limiting how much people engage with one another, even in the same room. "The way we become more human is by paying attention to each other," he says.

It's not just that people are distracted. The very nature of the medium itself, while promising intimacy and connection, actually ends up being alienating. A recent article of Achim Magazine, the Reform movement's Brotherhood Publication, asks the following questions with regard to Facebook: "Having been relegated to our screens, are our friendships now anything more than a form of distraction? When they're shrunk to the size of a wall post, do they retain any content? If we have 768 'friends,' in what sense do we really have any?" The

writer bemoans the fact that friendships have been reduced to mere feelings, rather than to true relationships forged through shared experiences. In the world of Facebook, “information replaces experience.”

The writer continues: “Reading about the mundane details of [my friends’] lives, a steady stream of trivia and ephemera, leaves me feeling both empty and unpleasantly full, as if I had just binged on junk food, and precisely because it reminds me of the real sustenance, the real knowledge we exchange by e-mail or phone or face-to-face. And the whole theatrical quality of the business, the sense that my friends are doing their best to impersonate themselves, only makes it worse. The person I read about, I cannot help feeling, is not quite the person I know.”

The director of the Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at Stanford claims that the immediacy of the Internet, the efficiency of the iPhone, and the anonymity of the chat room may very well be changing the core of who we are. Excessive use of these technologies can cause us to become more impatient, impulsive, forgetful, and even more narcissistic. If you think that you might be at risk of this kind of change in your personality, ask yourself:

Are your Facebook friends more interesting than those you have in real life?  
Has high-speed Internet made you impatient with slow-speed children?  
Do you sometimes think about reaching for the fast-forward button,  
only to realize that life does not come with a remote control?

Certainly, technology can make our lives easier in many ways. Thanks to the Internet, research is now at the tip of our fingers, rather than buried in the stacks at the library. Through texting and cell phones, parents can keep track of their children and can be available fairly instantly in case of an emergency. People can organize for causes through Facebook. Yet, aren’t we losing our ability to know one another directly, flaws, human failings and all? Intimacy and real connection take time, patience, devotion, sensitivity, subtlety, and skill. Understanding someone’s true character takes seeing them in action, witnessing their behavior, and interacting with them. Don’t we need to be seen in the most profound sense of the word, really seen for who we are, really acknowledged as ourselves? Even in the movie, “Avatar,” the hero and his romantic interest seal their

relationship when they can finally say to one another, “I see you.”

This is a message offered to us by our Torah. If we were to observe a second day of Rosh Hashanah, we would read the story of Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant, who is mistreated and escapes to the desert. God hears her cries of distress and promises her a bright future. Hagar then says to God, “You are El Roi; You are The God Who Sees Me.” Sarah and Abraham think of Hagar as just a slave. God sees Hagar as a human being, and as a matriarch. As Rabbi Naomi Levy tells us: “God didn’t do a thing for Hagar except to remind her of her own power. And that’s why a lonely, lost slave gave God a new name: The God Who Sees Us as we are and reminds us of who we can be.”

Can you and I see each other and remind one another of our true potential? Can we unplug long enough to pay attention to those who are most important to us? Can we live life in the here and now? Can our own lives be more engaging than that of an avatar? Let us not allow technological devices to numb us to the beauty inherent in our fellow beings. Let us not escape our emotions and our entanglements by creating fake personalities and made-up lives. Let us pledge this year to engage in our world with all its messiness and all its wonder.