

VULNERABILITY: EREV ROSH HASHANA 5774

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This past spring, I attended my nephew's high school graduation. I was struck by one of the speeches given by his classmate, Zeke Goodman. Zeke said: "A couple of months ago I was with my mom and we were in Beverly Hills going to a doctor's appointment. We were directly across the street from the doctor's office. There was no cross walk between us and the building and as a car passed and we prepared to cross the road I noticed that my mom ever so slightly extended her hand back, as if she was reaching for mine, as if seeking to ensure my safe passage. When we reached the other side and I pointed out what she did, she started crying in a crowded elevator, which, as you can imagine, was not the reaction I was expecting. When reflecting on the profound awkwardness of that moment, I was reminded of something Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "Children are all foreigners."

We might have the advantage of a working knowledge of the language, structure, and cultural values of the society but our whole lives, our whole educational careers, have been a preparation for our exodus. The world we are being pushed into is in a time of great transition, a time of restructuring. And now just as we are ready to leave and become members of this society, we are told that there may be no place left for us; that we will not receive the privileges that we expected to gain from our work and status. We may be condemned to simply return to the nest, to remain children, to never gain our citizenship. The only way we can go then is towards something totally new, a new society that we own, and to leave behind whatever we can of the old one. Though we can thank our parents, teachers, and other mentors, though we can thank the people here today for guiding us thus far, we can't take the safe route, the idle privileged route just because it is there; I can't let my mom hold my hand while we cross the street anymore. We, as a group, as a nation, must make that transition together."

Making the transition from high school to college is a moment of great vulnerability for young folks, particularly at this time of economic constraint. The world they are being sent into is nothing if uncertain. They can no longer expect to get a job for life, with ample benefits, including health care and retirement. As parents, we can no longer hold our children's hands as they try and navigate this new reality. For young adults who are part of the working class, the picture is even more frightening. Jennifer Silva, author of the upcoming book, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* writes that these "Young...men and women...are trying to figure out what it means to be an adult in a world of disappearing jobs, soaring education costs and shrinking social support networks...They live at home longer, spend more years in college, change jobs more frequently and start families later..."

These are people bouncing from one temporary job to the next; dropping out of college

because they can't figure out financial aid forms or fulfill their major requirements; relying on credit cards for medical emergencies; and avoiding romantic commitments because they can take care of only themselves. Increasingly disconnected from institutions of work, family and community, they grow up by learning that counting on others will only hurt them in the end. Adulthood is not simply being delayed but dramatically reimagined along lines of trust, dignity and connection and obligation to others."¹

So at a time when we are all feeling incredibly vulnerable because of these massive changes, we are also more isolated than ever. The excellent seminal book, *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam was published in 2000, but its findings still hold true today. In it, Putnam discusses the dramatic decrease in civic engagement in the last few decades. According to Putnam, over the past two generations, we have become increasingly isolated and thus less compassionate toward our fellow citizens. "Active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plummeted," he says, in favor of "mailing list membership[s]" which require us to write checks but not to encounter one another.² The breakdown of community that we have been experiencing is highlighted by Putnam in the "close-knit Jewish neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island." To celebrate the festival of Purim, this community used to visit one another, bringing gifts of fruit and pastries in observance of the mitzvah of Mishloach Manot..."In recent years, however, this custom has been interrupted by pressures of time, family, vacations and the like. Nowadays, as Purim approaches, a resident is likely to receive an engraved note from neighbors, like this one:

*...It will not be possible for us to fulfill the mitzvah
of Mishloach Manot this year.
Please do not leave any Mishloach Manot outside our door...
The squirrels, dogs, cats, and rabbits will eat them.
Instead of Mishloach Manot, we have donated
to the Jewish Theological Seminary in your name.*

[While t]he philanthropic purpose is admirable[, t]he traditional visits... [had] also reinforced bonds within this community. A check in an envelope, no matter how generous, cannot have that same effect."³

Putnam writes that "...fewer and fewer of us find that the League of Women Voters, or the United Way, or the Shriners, or the monthly bridge club, or even a Sunday picnic with friends fits the way we have come to live. Our growing social-capital deficit threatens educational performance, safe neighborhoods, equitable tax collection, democratic responsiveness, everyday honesty, and even our health and happiness."

¹ NY Times, June 23, 2013.

² *Bowling Alone*, p. 63.

³ *Bowling Alone*, p. 117.

Pressures of time and money are certainly contributing factors to our increasing isolation. But more important are the effects of electronic media. Putnam argues that the real problem is that we are spending too many hours in front of a screen. While Putnam's book was written before the ubiquity of smartphones, what he says about television can easily apply to today's technologies. In the following description, replace the word "television" with "iPhone."

"Time diaries show that husbands and wives spend three or four times as much time watching television together as they spend talking to each other, and six to seven times as much as they spend in community activities outside the home. Moreover, as the number of TV sets per household multiplies, even watching together becomes rarer."⁴ Haven't we all been at a dinner table where everyone has their eyes peeled on a SmartPhone? Or at a business meeting with participants texting in plain sight? Or in class with people checking Facebook? Putnam notes that: "...watching things...occupies more and more of our time, while doing things (especially with other people) occupies less and less."⁵ He concludes: "In small ways and in larger ways, too – we Americans need to reconnect with one another."⁶

But how do we turn the tide which privileges solitary hours illuminated by a screen over time spent with neighbors, friends, family and folks with common interests? If I may be so bold, I would like to suggest that Judaism offers us some answers. Judaism is a religion and a culture of community. You cannot be a Jew alone. If you are in mourning, you cannot say the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, unless there is a minyan, a minimum of 10 adults, present. You cannot even praise God with the Barechu, the call to prayer, unless a minyan is present. And you can't read the Torah from a scroll without a minyan. Judaism tells us that we are responsible for one another, as the famous Rabbi Hillel warned: "Do not separate from the community." During High Holy Days, we confess together in the first person plural, "we have sinned." We take responsibility for each other's actions. The Torah, our guide to life, was given to us as a community. The Haftarah portion that we read for Rosh Hashanah features the Priest Ezra assembling the whole people to hear the reading of the Torah. This is, in a sense, the second giving of the Torah, a kind of reenactment of the scene at Mt. Sinai, indeed a reenactment we perform every time we take the Torah out of the ark during services. We receive the Torah TOGETHER, not as solitary individuals. At Mt. Sinai, we responded to God as one people, in one communal voice, "Naaseh v'nishmah," we will do and we will understand. Just imagine how different it would be to post the Kaddish on Facebook three times a day while in mourning. Or to receive the Torah via email.

⁴ *Bowling Alone*, p. 224.

⁵ *Bowling Alone*, p. 245.

⁶ *Bowling Alone*, p. 28.

Or to confess our sins via smart phone.

Author Jonathan Safran Foer, the writer of *Everything Is Illuminated*, adds another dimension to the dangers of technology.

In his very eloquent Commencement Address at Middlebury College this past spring, he maintains that, not only does “TV [steal] time, it also seems to encourage lethargy and passivity...

Technology celebrates connectedness, but encourages retreat.”⁷

It makes it possible for us to hide behind email and text messages and to never actually speak to others. Says Foer: “Each step ‘forward’ [in our technological capabilities] has made it easier, just a little, to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity.” Not communicating face-to-face reduces our ability to feel compassion for the other. So does being distracted by multi-tasking. “The more distracted we become, and the more emphasis we place on speed at the expense of depth, the less likely and able we are to care,” he says.

Educator Donna Houseman reminds us that that REAL connections offer us the chance to become more self-aware, and to develop a better understanding of what goes on with other people.⁸

So, how can we be attentive to the needs of others, when we are each in our own bubble, focusing only on what interests us? Jonathan Foer suggests that:

“There is no better use of a life than to be attentive to such needs... all of them require attentiveness, all of them require the hard work of emotional computation and corporeal compassion....Being attentive to the needs of others might not be the point of life, but it is the work of life.”

Here again, I would like to suggest that Judaism offers a counter-balance, a way to increase attentiveness and compassion. Take the mitzvot – the commandments. Each time we do something – whether we eat, light candles, or study Torah, we are enjoined to say a blessing. Why? I think it is to make us more mindful of what we are doing. We don’t just plunge into an activity unthinkingly.

We have to take a moment to acknowledge what we are about to do and to remember the source of our blessings.

We hang a mezuzah on the doorposts of our house which contains the V’Ahavta because we want to remember that, as we enter a home, we need to treat the people inside with respect and dignity. So mindfulness is built into the system.

At a time when our world is scary and uncertain, we need to be able to reach out to each other with more than a text message. We need to revive community

⁷ *Bowling Alone*, p. 238.

⁸ Letter to the Editor, “The Antisocial Effects of Social Media,” NY Times, April 26, 2012

where we know each other face-to-face, not through the image we post on Facebook. Change is our constant and the world is moving at an increasingly rapid pace. We need the comfort and strength provided by community more than ever before.

A story from our tradition. When the Torah says: “All the tribes of Israel together,”⁹ it means when they form one (unified) group...Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (compared this to) a parable: A man bought two ships, tied them to anchors and iron weights, stationed them in the middle of the sea, and built a palace upon them. As long as the two ships are tied to each other, the palace stands firm. Once the ships are separated, the palace cannot stand. Thus it is also with Israel...”¹⁰ We must stand together in real time, in real space, not in cyber time and cyber space. Together, we can face uncertainty and trying times and we can come up with viable solutions to the challenges of modern life.

But to do so, we must take a Sabbath from our technology – at least every now and then – and plunge into the messy business of connecting with one another face to face. Zeke may be too old for his mother to take his hand when he crosses the street. But we must help the Zekes of our world face their future with the love and support of a real community of live people. As we assert our love of God through our prayers, let us remember that we express that love through loving our neighbor – not their avatar on a screen.

⁹⁹ Deut. 33:5

¹⁰ Sifre on Deuteronomy, 346