

## **Rosh Hashanah 5774 (2013) – First Day**

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett

### **Being Here in the Digital Age**

Over the past couple of years, I have developed a nagging but interesting physical issue. It's a tingling sensation I get about five times a week, and it's almost always in the same place, on the front of my left thigh. When it happens, I instinctively go for my instant relief – I reach into my pocket to answer my cellphone.

But it's not there. Nothing is actually vibrating; nothing is buzzing at all.

It turns out there's are names for this. Some scientists are calling it “phantom ring” – like the sensation that people experience who have lost a part of their bodies, but feel as though it's still there. Michael Rothberg, a researcher at the Bay State Medical Center in Springfield, Massachusetts, surveyed medical staff found that about two-thirds experienced phantom ring, and 13% of them did on a daily basis. Some high school students claim they can sense vibrations in their bodies as they sit in class, when their phone is actually ringing in their locker.

I have a different name for this, because I think the phantom ring is part of a larger issue. Let me be a bit 1980s for the time being, and call it “call-waiting syndrome.” In the era of mobile communications, of phones on our bodies and intensive texting, we live in a constant state of anticipation for the other line. It's the feeling that the conversation I am having now, or whatever I am thinking about or doing, could be interrupted any moment by someone else, somewhere else. And it's the assumption that when that happens, the other thing, the other ring, is more important than who I am with right now.

Dr. Rothberg puts it scientifically. Our brains are these days bombarded with all kinds of electronic stimuli, and when the brain doesn't know how to interpret a sensation, its first response is to run home to the most likely explanation. It's getting wired into many people, in other words, to be always expecting a call or a text, to be ready to interrupt now and here, for that.

This phenomenon has already burrowed its way into our sense of everyday etiquette. I have sat with with someone, meeting individually in my office or studying one-on-one, and forgotten to turn off my phone, and it buzzes. And in the middle of a conversation, the person who has come has said very graciously to me, “You can get that.” As if it's obvious that the unknown call, from somewhere else, is more important, than what we are talking about here. Of course I reassure them that I don't have to get that, and I'm

not going to.... and for a moment I feel good about that. Until I realize where we've come. Sitting face-to-face with a person is no longer a promise of undivided attention.

Let me say right now that you are not hearing the beginning of an anti-technology sermon. Not from the publisher of rabbijon.com, the creator of podcasts you can subscribe to on iTunes (...on Saturday night!), who is managing work and personal e-mail accounts, two landlines and a cellphone, and a Facebook account I don't look at too much with a whimsical picture I haven't changed in more than five years. When we continue this discussion, it might even be partly online, who knows?

I'm going to resist telling you my favorite horror stories, the cheap points about the excesses of technology. I want to stay close to the what happens in the mainstream as we are integrating new ways of keeping in touch into our lives. How regular, caring individuals are seduced and sometimes trapped. So I want to focus on this increasingly call-waiting posture toward living, and the issue of presence.

In this morning's Torah reading, we read of a boy who is seen by an adult only from a distance, who is sent away from his parents' presence, and eventually left to sit alone. You may have noticed that in this chapter he is never called by name. But you know his name, you know that it's Ishmael – *Yishma'el*, the one who is heard by God. His name is a rebuke to all those people around him, who can see him but don't listen to him. Who are we not listening to, even though they are in our physical presence? How are we being distracted by the buzzes and ringtones, the you've-got-mail's of our new existence? Why are we so ready to get the other line?

Our phones and screens are tools, and the real questions aren't about them, but about us. The mobile revolution is picking at something that is already very difficult for us, and making it even more difficult. We're here on Rosh Hashanah to look at ourselves and correct ourselves. I want to give us a way of talking about our digital lives, so you can go and think more, and actually talk with the people in your lives about what to do and what you might want to change. And this is everywhere in our larger culture, so it's important to think about this together, and to give each other support when we decide to do things that wider world might bristle at.

William Powers, in his book *Hamlet's Blackberry*, describes what he calls “The Vanishing Family Trick.” He talks sitting with his family together in his old cozy house, in the living room that used to be a stable, snuggled by the fireplace. Then, he says, someone says he needs a glass of water but doesn't come back, then another, and pretty soon it's only the cats and the dog, wondering where the human went! “To their screens, of course...the digital crowd has a way of elbowing its way into everything to the point

where a family can't sit in a room together for half an hour without somebody, or everybody, peeling off.”

Chances are, you know a family or you are in a family where people get in the car, and instead of talking with each other people are texting. Possibly communicating with the people they've just seen or are about to see in a few minutes when they get dropped off.

You go out for a cup of coffee with a friend, and the phone rings or buzzes and he says, “Oh, just a minute”, and in the middle of your conversation, they text for a couple minutes about some non-emergency.

And in workplaces it has become understood, that people peek at their screens during meetings.

These might seem like nuisances, little things we put up with because who really expected to have a serious conversation in the car. And probably his kid really did need him. And we know how people sometimes feel about meetings. But I'll tell you why it's not just a nuisance.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner wonders what it was that made the burning bush Moshe saw a miracle. He answers with a question: “How long would you have to watch wood burn to know that it was not being consumed? Even dry kindling is not burned up for five minutes. Moshe would have had to watch for several minutes to know what was happening.” The burnish bush, says Rabbi Kushner, wasn't a miracle, but a test. How long would Moshe pay attention to something that might be regular or everyday, on the chance that it might be more important?

How long do you have to listen to your child talking, before you know that something is on her mind? How long does it take to get past pleasantries, at work or in a volunteer project, before you feel comfortable enough to bring up a problem you had with someone else on the team? It takes time to work your way to asking for a favor, or asking for forgiveness. Or talking about something horrible that happened. Sometimes you have to ramble, before you circle around to what you really have to say. And sometimes, we don't really know what we want to say until we just start talking.

We can't really listen to each other, and we can't really be there for each other, if we're always expecting to answer the phone. If someone else from somewhere else has the same claim on you, as the person who is here, who needs you now.

I started to think about all of this a couple years ago when I heard a conversation on a

terrific public radio program that at the time was called “Speaking of Faith”, hosted by Krista Tippett. She interviewed a scholar from MIT named Sherry Turkle, who has been working since the beginning of the personal computing revolution to describe how these technologies shape our relationships and our personalities. Professor Turkle has watched and spoken carefully with all kinds of people from leading computer scientists to teenagers to children and elderly people interacting with sociable robots.

Professor Turkle has said that the wake-up call for her was a visit with her teenage daughter to the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, for a special exhibition on Darwin. Most of the animals at the museum are stuffed, but at the entrance were two large tortoises from the Galapagos Islands. Professor Turkle's daughter was looking at one of the tortoises, and said to her mother: “They could have used a robot.” Professor Turkle found the comment so fascinating that she began to talk to other parents and children who were there. One twelve-year-old girl said, “For what the turtles do, you didn't have to have the live ones.”

Professor Turkle observes that for the generation growing up today, there is a blurry line between things that are living and not living, real or not real. Children are dealing with the proliferation of computerized things by developing a unique language: they talk about something being “alive enough” for a specific purpose.

In a similar way, I wonder whether we're moving from an expectation of being present when we're together, to a shifting idea of being “present enough” for a particular situation. In 2013, we often don't expect ourselves, or the people we are talking with or living with, to be fully present a lot of the time. We're developing the skills to “listen enough” while we're texting, checking e-mail, or surfing. To be present enough, to share schedules in the car. Present enough, to learn basic details at a meeting at work. Present enough, to dash off a quick text, or a short, light Facebook update about what I'm doing or reading. Just present enough to be able to shift attention somewhere else at a moment's notice.

But really being present, that's what it's all about. One of the Hebrew words for presence is *panim*, the face. There is a beautiful expression in Hebrew for welcoming someone – *kabbalat panim*. It means, literally, “receiving the face.” Not just seeing someone's face, but receiving it. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav describes a person's face as a special kind of polished mirror. When another person receives your face, they become a mirror that shows who you really are. You come to believe in your truth, because the other person shows you your own face. The light you receive from the other, is your own light, and you believe in it because another person has understood, has shown it back to you.

Facebook is such a great name. There's a whole lot you can do on Facebook – it's a lot of fun, and there are good things that can be communicated that way. But what you can't do is *kabbalat panim* – receive someone's face. I worry that we're settling for Facebook, when what we crave is the face.

What is it about us, that we peel off to check our e-mail or Facebook wall when our loved ones are right here? What's behind the secret desire to take the other call, instead of being here right now?

To be truly face to face with another person is hard, and it's rare. The people who we truly trust in our lives are treasures beyond any measure of value. The friends we can open up to, share our fears with, share our dreams – we are fortunate if there are a small number in our lives, even one. And sometimes we are fearful of being real with other people. We fear being let down, being disappointed by those we consider our friends, and ending up being more alone, like Yishmael in the desert.

I think about the word “screen” a lot. Back in the day, screens were black and type was light, and now it's the other way around – the shining screen, which gives an impression of light and color and texture. But “screening” means filtering, shutting something out, holding something back, even as we show an image of ourselves.

I think it's fascinating how the screen and the text are replacing the voice. I've mentioned Yishma'el, in the Torah reading, the boy whose name means “God hears.” Out in the desert, the angel from God says that God has heard the voice of the child where he is – *ba'asher hu sham*, in that place where he was actually, right then and there. Before then, back at home, the Torah says that Sarah only saw him, but didn't hear.

Today, we are settling for being seen rather than heard. Our words are increasingly flat on a screen, rather than lush with our voice. We select our profile picture carefully, we either think carefully about what to “say” in text, or we dash off something simple, not from the heart. We think the picture and the words are shining, but it's not the truest light.

And our online connections are taking up the time we really need for real-life connections. We have every connection we've ever had at our fingertips. We go from call-waiting, to not even having someone right here in the first place. Somewhere else-ness is dangerous, the idea that here and now is just one more option. Only God, as we imagine God, is up to the challenge of being everywhere and still always present, always real. We can only be here, now.

And our short textual communications, I fear, are having an effect on real, person-to-person conversation. We express ourselves in type, rather than having a dialogue. And our next generation is being trained to interact by text, right at the time in their lives when you're ready to know what real friendship and relationships are all about.

Real conversations take time. They take time to have, but they take time to start – after you've worked up the courage to talk to your parent, to bring something up to the boss, to exchange pleasantries and lighten the mood. The device, whether you're using it or paying attention to it, sends a message – I might not have time for this right now, for you right now.

And we shouldn't forget the other thing that the call-waiting existence displaces, which is our own time with ourselves. Like Hannah in today Haftarah, we need time alone, to move our lips silently, to pour out our prayers, to be lost alone in reflection. Sanctuaries, like Hannah sought in Shiloh, without someone like Eli the *kohen* interrupting, commenting, judging what they see, rather than what is truly there to be heard.

So, what are we to do with this? Like everything, from fire to automobiles to the first telephones, technology isn't good or bad, it's a tool. We can use it well, or we can use it badly.

I see Judaism as a way of approaching these issues. First a spiritual lens, as I've been trying to describe. The other Jewish things we do are to ask questions, and to develop limits.

So first, ask yourself: What is one thing that is already bothering you about the mobile device in your life? And come up with one tentative rule you're going to try living by. This is what I started to do as soon as I decided on this topic for a sermon. For me, it's about my laptop. I love it, and I'll often set it up in the kitchen to listen to a talk or to check the news while I make dinner. But the kids are also in the kitchen, doing homework or getting a snack. My new rule is that the computer won't be on or won't even be in the room when another family member is there, whether we intend to be talking or not.

Second, think very carefully about what you are tempted to communicate about by screen rather than voice. My father taught me: Don't kid over the telephone. As a corollary, a good guideline is to communicate nothing controversial or emotional except by voice. Don't write an angry e-mail to a group, don't respond to someone who writes a note about something upsetting except with a call. Figure out something similar for

yourself. Don't assume you can be real by text or e-mail, unless you have an explicit understanding about that with the other person. If it's important enough to express, pick up the phone or find a way to be in person.

The result of this is that you start noticing how much you're trying to communicate. You'll begin to ask yourself, constantly, what's worth taking time to communicate about. Which of the hundreds of messages on the screen are important, and which are just taking you away from those conversations that you would really have.

Third, there is an obvious haven in Judaism, and that is Shabbat. When we welcome Shabbat we sing: *p'nai Shabbat n'kab'lah – let us receive the face of Shabbat*. Try this out: let Shabbat be a day of special communication, without tiny snippets and interruptions from elsewhere. There is a group of young Jewish artists who have published a Sabbath Manifesto, and scheduled a National Day of Unplugging for the Shabbat of March 7-8, 2014. You can buy from them a “cellphone sleeping bag” with their emblem!

I'm not an absolutist about that. But Shabbat should be a day to put aside the line from elsewhere, the communication by snippet and text. It should be a day wide open for real togetherness, for conversations or the leisure of conversation with the people who are important, even by phone. I treasure the conversations of the people I spend Shabbat with – my wife and kids, guests we have over, people we see here.

Finally, get a conversation going – in your family, with the friends you spend the most meaningful time with. Even with the boss or your workgroup. So you can hash this out, and talk about what you need in order to be there, for all the important purposes of friendship and constructive work that bring you together in each other's presence. Say it out loud.

The hardest thing will be to figure out how to pare down, because we will have to lose some connections to invest in the ones that matter most. Our kids needs us, our parents, our friends. The little chats in the car matter, because of what they might be the start of, or because they signal that we each care enough about each other. We still need the phone, because some of those conversations have to be that way. But I'm betting it's possible to cure that phantom ring, as we become less concerned about what we're missing somewhere else, and more attentive to what's happening in the conversation we're on, even if when it is on a phone.

For a lot of you, the time we are spending here in the synagogue may be the longest you have been away from your phones in a long time. It has been time when the other line

cannot interfere with your thoughts, your concentration on important things, your time in the presence of God. Learn from it, even get used to it. *Yishar kochachem* – good job, even if this is difficult and you've been tempted to duck out.

But I hope you do talk about this – talk back to me, bring the talk forward, in parent groups and other places, and we'll set something up too where we can talk about what works, so our congregation can be a place of wisdom about this all.

In our always-connected world, where it's always tempting not to be here, don't forget: The smartphone is not a Shofar. The wake-up calls we need, the noise that will shake us in a moment, the messages that are truly urgent – these don't come by call waiting. They come when we are present – here, now, listening. When we are with one another, with our own quiet selves, and with God.

Shana Tova.