

Yom Kippur Unplugged!

Kol Nidre 5773

Rabbi Hal Rudin-Luria

On Yom Kippur, the Chassidic Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev would slowly make his way to the front of the shul and the assembled congregation would pay close attention to their rebbe. Standing on the bimah, Levi Yitzchak would wrap himself in his tallit, hunch his shoulders over and begin to loudly beat his chest. With tears flowing, he would confess for himself and his community. Crying out to G-d, he would open up his own soul and admit his wrongs and then everyone would follow his lead, beating their chests and sharing with G-d their faults and promises for renewal.

I stand before this Holy congregation on the holiest night of the year and have to confess my sins before G-d and ask for forgiveness.

Al Cheit Shechatati lefanecha, I have sinned against You knowingly and unknowingly.

Al Cheit Shechatati lefanecha, I have sinned against You by driving and texting.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by interrupting a conversation to answer my cell phone.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by checking my work email while on vacation.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by updating Facebook in the middle of family time.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by not immediately responding to your voicemail.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by bringing my cellphone, tablet and laptop to the dinner table and to bed.

Al Cheit Shechatati Lefanecha, I have sinned against You by tweeting the two word “Forgive me” message to all my Twitter followers thinking that a two word impersonal apology was enough to atone for a year of faults.

For all these sins, forgive me, pardon me and grant me atonement.

Am I the only person in our congregation who must confess this 5773 version of the “Al Cheit’s”? Have you committed any of these offenses this year? I read an article advising us to turn off our computer at least an hour before bed each night to insure better quality of sleep. And do I practice this? No. All too often, I fall into the trap just before going to bed of checking Facebook or searching the news for an interesting post. Or maybe, I’ll check my email to make sure there is nothing critical to respond to in the middle of the night, thinking only then I can rest easier. The problem is that when everything is fine, I end up thinking about all the things I just read.

The constant need to be plugged in has a name: it is called FOMO or Fear of Missing Out. The fear that something is happening right now and whatever it is, is more important than what we are engaged in at the same time. FOMO can motivate people to text while driving, to interrupt one phone call in order to answer another, or to check Twitter during a date. We do this because we are concerned that right now at this very minute something more interesting might be happening. We feel out of the loop and may be missing out on something special.

We live in a 24/7 world that allows us the opportunity at any hour to connect with friends, watch anything we would like, to get live news from around the world and to share our thoughts with thousands of online friends at 2 am or 12 noon. These technological breakthroughs offer us incredible gains but also have their downside. I love Facebook and Twitter. They offer me the ability to reconnect with childhood friends that live thousands of miles away or to share insights with congregants who may not come to all our services or class offerings. Our children can sing and read books with their grandparents who do not live in Cleveland. Instantaneously, I can find out the Browns score or if another rocket was fired from Gaza into Southern Israel. We can be inspired to donate and volunteer for causes found through the web and to get more involved in synagogue and feel closer to Israel. I follow the lives of thousands of friends, colleagues, mentors and celebrities.

To be honest, keeping up on social networks is exhausting and it is constant. Once caught in the web of the internet, it is nearly inescapable.

Dan Ariely, a psychology professor, warns that: “When we scroll through pictures and status updates, the worry that tugs at the corners of our minds is set off by the fear of regret that we have made the wrong decision about how to spend our time. At that very moment, you can imagine how things could be different in your life.” FOMO, the fear of missing out, is the perpetual state of anxiety that makes us keep checking our cell phones or Facebook accounts to keep up with the Schwartz’s. FOMO motivates us when sitting on the couch at home enjoying a movie with our family to check Facebook to see photos of friends at fancy restaurants, making us think less of our valuable and precious family movie night. FOMO is not only about feeling jealous or inadequate, it is also about feeling connected and part of something larger.

Many years ago, Rabbi Israel Salanter taught that we were created with two eyes for a reason. With one eye, we look at our neighbors, fastening our gaze on their goodness, excellence and most desirable qualities. With the other eye, we turn our glance inward to see our own lives and identify our strengths and shortcomings. For Rabbi Salanter, it is not about Keeping up with the Schwartz’s, it is not only looking outward but self-reflection, it’s about learning from others to inspire us to be the best we can be.

Yom Kippur is a day to re-sync our souls. For 25 hours we go unplugged. Without food or drink, without leather shoe or physical intimacy, without shower or perfume, we are commanded to afflict ourselves. Feeling the pangs of hunger and experiencing the distress of want, are we fully unplugged? Yom Kippur is given another name in the Torah: Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths or the ultimate Sabbath, the definitive day for unplugging. As we engage in the process of Teshuvah, repentance and return, we must engage in the internal process of self-reflection.

Today, the rabbis advise us to unplug from the web, from cell phone and Facebook, from Twitter and email with a technology fast. 25 hours to re-sync with ourselves and improve the connection between our soul and G-d. 25 hours without any status updates or tweets so that we can once again clarify what is most important, our family, our friends, our connections with G-d and

community. Just like our internet connection has to refresh, we also must take the time to reflect on the ultimate Sabbath with a technology break.

In describing the first Shabbat in the world, the Torah states: “*U’vayom Hasheve’i Shavat Va’yinafash*, and on the seventh day of Creation, G-d ceased from all work and rested.” Though it may feel like an affliction today, a technology break is holy and follows G-d’s example. Working 24/6, after six days of creating the world, G-d rested. We also need to rest and unplug. The word used for rest in the Torah passage is “*va’yinafash*” which comes from the word “*nefesh*” which means soul. It is as though our very souls need this time to recharge and become rejuvenated.

This summer, I spent two weeks at Camp Ramah in Canada with very limited cell phone and email access. Without technology connections grabbing my attention and taking my time, I was forced to experience everything around me more fully, to unplug and recharge. I spent more time preparing for the classes I was teaching, engaging with the campers, enjoying the beautiful lakefront, enjoying my children and family, and the opportunity to mentor younger staff. As the FOMO feelings got to me at camp, I did search the camp grounds for internet access and find someone who could give me a log-in code. I found the one place in camp that provided the strongest wi-fi internet signal so that I could update facebook and follow the Olympics. Do I have to confess again, Al Cheit Shechatati lefanecha, I have sinned against You by stealing precious moments at summer camp on my laptop computer?

The truth is that we are all still trying to find the right balance between technology and life. Perhaps during these hours unplugged, we may not live our lives on line, we can live them in person. We may not pick up the phone but we will talk face to face, like Moses spoke with G-d. We may not take pictures of families praying at services together or recordings of the Cantor’s moving melodies, but the memories alone of these moments can leave a lasting imprint. We will not focus on other’s lives but take a deeper look at our own. A day’s break from technology may offer us the perspective on how to set limits and place boundaries on our internet selves. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, can be broken into the day of at-one-ment. Unplugging allows us a small window to be alone with ourselves in order to recharge and reconnect to our deepest source of strength in our lives: our family, our community, our tradition and G-d.

May this Yom Kippur Unplugged remind us to live in the moment rather than tweet it. May we take the time to find what matters most in our lives. May we remember that this may be the Sabbath of Sabbaths, but we have the opportunity and blessing of a 25 hour technology break every Shabbat of the year. May we use this time to reflect, reconnect, recharge, and refocus our lives. G'mar Chatima Tova, May we all be written and sealed in the book of life.