

Technology and the Jewish Holidays: Insights from *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology*

On March 6-7 there will be a national focus on an unplugged Shabbat, spearheaded by *Reboot* and a coalition of other organizations. We ought to celebrate this effort (<http://nationaldayofunplugging.com/>). I share none of the cynicism of a colleague who remarked somewhat quizzically “well, didn’t we have Shabbat before we had “unplugged Shabbat”?. Nor was it really helpful when a more philosophically minded colleague pointed to Abraham Joshua Heschel’s volume Shabbat as having captured the value message that goes well beyond the behavioral dimension of Shabbat, a back-handed compliment to the unplugged Shabbat efforts if there ever was one.

Learning new behaviors like turning off our technology on Shabbat requires a creative surround for the greater part of Jewry for whom shemirat Shabbat is neither organic nor ingrained. Perhaps the effort marches best under the rabbinic banner of *m’toch lo b’shma bah lishma*, if one first unplugs in order to be in synch with a cultural happening or national movement perhaps in the course of time one deepens one’s appreciation for all the spiritual meanings of Shabbat.

The inspiration of an unplugged Shabbat reminds me of other Jewish holidays and how they might help us put technology in a more helpful perspective. Shabbat is a time for cessation, rest, and renewal. Yom Kippur is Shabbat, shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths. It is a time where restfulness helps us to see our lives in a larger perspective.

Over the last seven months since I reported on the joint Covenant –Jewish Education Center of Cleveland project *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology* (August 10, 2014) in I have had a chance to think about the *semichut*, the hidden connections between two phenomena: the flourishing of musar and other techniques of reflective centering with the overwhelming pace of technological change. The pace of such change and the

attrition of reliable, traditional sources of authority make the internalization of *middot*, all the more critical.

Values always need to be internalized in order to be useful. Such internalization is spiritual work. They serve the purpose of bestowing perspective to an individual's relationship with others, self, and technology in a time of great flux. The following midrash about the purpose of a *siyag*/a fence in Jewish law is illuminating. Often, a fence is thought of as a mechanical, restrictive tool of those who wish to be *machmirim*, more hard-liners in their interpretation of Jewish law. The following Midrash suggests that its prime function is otherwise, is actually that of bestowing perspective:

**Enter not into the path of the wicked...Avoid it, pass not by it; turn from it and pass on (Prov : 14-15) . Rabbi Ashi said: The verse may be illustrated by the parable of a man who guards an orchard. If he guards it from without , the entire orchard is protected; but if he guards it from within, only the part in front of him is protected, while the part behind him is not protected**

Much of the creative work of *Text Me: Ancient Jewish Wisdom Meets Contemporary Technology* has been designed to allow parents to step back from the webs of technology that envelop them and think about their own relationship to technology. This is indeed in my judgment a necessary prelude to their effectively guiding their children in their relationship to technology.

Drawn from the tool chest of methods of the adult study sessions of *Text Me*, below one finds the simplest of charts designed to help people do a *heshbon ha-nefesh* spiritual inventory of their digital habits. It is a heuristic for self-exploration, hopefully a sorting activity of deceptively profound simplicity.

<b>Absolutely necessary</b>	<b>Recreational/Fun</b>
<b>Important but not necessary</b>	<b>Problematic or out of control</b>

We have developed more nuanced charts as tools for family dialogue around technology. While there is poignancy given the pervasive role of technology in our lives to find some time during Elul or during the aseret yamei t'shuva (the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, such inward attention to our relationship to technology can be helpful at any time.

Beyond behaviors, one acknowledges Yom Kippur as a time of spiritual self-affirmation as well as inventory. As my teacher Rabbi Ivan Caine once remarked our greatest scriptural challenge is to stop living out the verse from Leviticus love your neighbor as yourself so literally and effectively. In truth, few of us really truly love ourselves and we often enough project our lack of self-love onto others in the form of a generalized self-hatred.

Sherry Terkle in Alone Together suggests how twisted and difficult true self-acceptance has become in the face of contemporary social media.

*Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These it suggests are the substitutions that put the real on the run. The advertising for Second Life, a virtual world where you get to build an avatar is quite clear: “Finally a place to love your body, love your friends and love your life.” On Second Life, a lot of people, as represented by their avatars, are richer than they are in first life and a lot younger, thinner, and better dressed.*

I’m appreciative to the San Francisco Reboot professional who attended my *Text Me* workshop for educators and reminded me of the value of a national day of unplugging. I’m hopeful that I am in some small way repaying the favor by adding that there is a Yom Kippur dimension to our relationship with technology as well.

Thinking more broadly, it is clear that both the Jewish holidays and technology are all-pervasive aspects of our live as 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews. We ought to think about their relationship in creative ways. It seems so obvious that on line resources (one thinks of My Jewish Learning as well as movement oriented resources in this regard though that is hardly exhaustive) can help family in *hachanat he-chag*, preparation for the holiday. The web is also throbbing with Tzedaka opportunities for families that can honor any given holiday and make of the family a veritable Tzedakah cooperative.

My “hero” and Jewish teacher Mordecai Kaplan’s *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* remains a useful exploration of the “functional” meaning of each

Jewish holiday for Jews of a given era. His “era” was distinctively modern. We post moderns would do well to write an appendix to the volume where the core value of each holiday is related to the powerful, shaping forces of technology in our lives.