Technology and Personal Relationships

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Patches of Godlight: A Rosh Hashanah Sermon[1]

Exactly four years ago, on *Shabbat Shuva*, I stood, for the first time in my life, in a pulpit, and delivered a synagogue sermon. I approached the task with some trepidation; not because the *derasha* would generate the synagogue's first impressions of its new rabbinic intern, but because there was a woman sitting attentively in the audience, hearing me speak for the first time, a woman who I very much hoped would become my wife. And I think it was on that Shabbat, that very day, that my *davening* was dramatically different. You see, when it comes to *tefilla,* I must ruefully acknowledge the regretful admission of the theologian C.S. Lewis: "Let us," he once said, "come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer, but not while we are reading a novel or solving a cross-word puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us." For this *semikha* student, an aspiring representative of the Jewish faith, *davening* was not devotional dialogue with the Divine, but rote repetition, mindless moil. But that High Holy Day season, something had changed; I approached the Almighty not as a Master mechanically served, but as a Friend in Whom I

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confided, confessing, somewhat shyly, my hopes and dreams, and asking for His help in achieving their actualization.

And I think that the shift in my attitude toward *tefilla* is easily understood. A comedian once commented on the "voice mail" phenomenon: we have reached a point, he said, when calling a friend or family member has become an annoying obligation, and so we pick up the phone, dial, hoping, hoping, to get the answering machine. We often experience a sinking feeling when someone on the other side picks up. Now we'll actually have to speak to our aunt, or parent, or sibling, engage him or her in conversation. We will have to sacrifice our precious time making small talk, and perhaps we may even have to go visit them. Upon hearing someone pick up, the comedian commented, we're tempted to say, "I'm sorry; I was calling for your machine; I really just wanted to leave a message saying 'sorry I missed you;' would you mind hanging up and letting me call again?" Leaving a message allows us to fulfill our original obligations without engendering new ones; answering machines enable us to avoid each other. We live in an age when we can contact anyone, anytime; cell phone, pager, internet. Yet technology has also allowed us fulfill our business and personal obligations without actual relationships. Never has it been easier to be in touch with one another; but at the same time, never has it been easier to actually avoid genuine interaction with one another.

The same can be said for prayer. We are obligated to talk to God several times a day, but I had always avoided actual interaction with the Almighty as much as possible. Standing in *tefilla*, as my mouth began to mutter the words, my mind would immediately wander; though my feet stood still, my concentration fled in fear of the Father who I might actually meet in the midst of my devotion, and who would no doubt disapprove of whatever sins I had committed. For prayer establishes a relationship between Man and God, and any relationship involves obligations on both sides. There's a profound passage in Leon Wieseltier's book *Kaddish*, in which Wieseltier records his year of mourning for his father. He had

not, Wieseltier recounts, been to *shul* regularly for some time. Now, he had undertaken the arduous and uncomfortable task of attending services three times a day. Wieseltier recounts that he began one morning by telling a terrible lie to someone close to him, and then went to *shul* to find that he could not truly pray, he could not actually face God. "This," Wieseltier reflects, "is more than I bargained for." In other words, actually interfacing with the Almighty may make us feel forced to upgrade our spiritual standards. As a theologian once put it, a person often prays faintly, "lest God might actually hear him, which he, poor man, never actually intended." Similarly, I too had no intention of actually making God a part of my life; and so I swiftly recited *Shemoneh Esrei,* severing my cosmic connection before God picked up the phone.

But that *Shabbat Shuvah*, everything changed. Prayer was easier after I was ready to dedicate my life to someone aside from myself. I approached my Maker with less reluctance and greater resolve; I was ready to actually "make a call;" to not only leave a voice mail, but to dialogue with God, tell him my concerns, enter into a relationship with my Heavenly Father. And though I knew that the prospect of praying, and of a genuine interaction, would inevitably result in a relationship of responsibility, and of sacrifice, I had come to the conclusion that obligating oneself to another, though daunting, is also enriching. For I had found someone who I had wanted to call, whose voice I wanted to hear on the other end of the line; and it was only with crushing disappointment that I would get her answering machine. Why could not my relationship with the Almighty be the same? It is the loving relationships with our spouses, our siblings, our children, our friends—all relationships that call for sacrifice—that serve as a spiritual springboard for a loving relationship with God.

There's an old joke about a fellow who falls off a cliff, and, on his way down, grabs hold of a branch protruding from the side of that cliff. As he dangles there, with the canyon hundreds of feet below and with no other people around, he looks up to Heaven and exclaims: "Is there anyone up there?

Please, if there's anyone up there, help me!" All of a sudden a divine voice comes out of the heavens and says: "If you really believe, let go." The man looks down at the ravine, looks up again, and says: "Uh…is there anyone *else* up there?" A relationship with God, begun by prayer and continued throughout our lives, is two-sided; we ask things of God, but He asks us to sacrifice as well. But that is true of our relationship with human beings as well; relationships with our family, with our friends, all call for sacrifice on both sides, but that is what makes the relationship meaningful.

In his book *Civility,* Yale law professor Stephen Carter notes that in the nineteenth century, everyone traveled by train. Whether it was first, second, or third class, everyone traveled together, and were forced to sacrifice a bit for each other, and treat each other with civility, in order to make the ride more bearable. Now, Carter writes with dismay, everyone travels by car; we all travel alone, and so we are less civil to each other, for we now longer have what he calls "fellow passengers." The Volkswagon advertisement, says Carter, says it all: "On the road of life, there are passengers and there are drivers," with the commercial concluding, "drivers wanted." Everyone ought to be a driver, everyone ought to pave their own path through life, no one ought to have passengers, no one ought to sacrifice for our fellow man. Carter's point is that in today's day and age we feel less reliant on others. Thanks to technology, we have microwaves for food, televisions for entertainment, computers for communication, and so we do not feel as if relationships are so important.

But in truth, though human relationships may be less essential *materially* in the information age—though we are now more capable of living our lives without sacrificing on behalf of others—such a life would be one devoid of meaning *spiritually*. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who received a doctorate in philosophy from Cambridge before becoming Chief Rabbi of Britain, once reflected that "the deepest insight I received into what makes a life worth living was not at university but when I began my career as a rabbi and had, for the first time, to officiate at

funerals. They were distressing moments, trying to comfort a family in the midst of grief, and I never found them easy, but they were extraordinarily instructive. In my address I had to paint a portrait of the deceased whom I might not have known personally, so I would talk first to the family and friends to try to understand what he or she meant to them. Almost always they spoke of similar things. The person who had died had been a supportive marriage partner, a caring parent. He or she had been a loyal friend, ready to help when help was needed. No one ever mentioned what they earned or bought, what car they drove, where they spent their holidays. The people most mourned," Sacks wrote, were not necessarily the most rich or successful. "They were people who enhanced the lives of others. They were kind. You could rely on them. They had a sense of responsibility. They gave time as well as money to voluntary causes. They were part of a community, living its values, sharing its griefs and celebrations. As this pattern repeated itself time and again, I realized what I was learning about more than the deceased. I was being educated into what makes a life well lived." Relationships are the foundation of a meaningful life, and what is true about relationships with each other is all the more true about our relationship with God.

Our fear of *amida lifnei ha-makom*, of standing before God's presence in prayer, and of relating to him, can be compared to a man who has lived his whole life in a dark forest, and who emerges all of a sudden into a shockingly bright sunlit world. The man would immediately cover his eyes and scurry, screaming, fearful, into the comfortingly familiar black world from whence he came. But imagine him finding a small patch of sunlight on the floor of the forest, and tracing that ray up a tree. As he climbs, the scenery surrounding him grows brighter and brighter, and he grows, gradually, accustomed to the light. He emerges eventually above the foliage and now gladly comes face to face with the benevolent brilliance of the sun itself. We are all afraid of abruptly confronting the *Shekhina*, of entering into a relationship with God; but at the same time, closeness to our fellow human beings, created in the *tzelem*,

image or reflection of God, helps bring us closer to Him, the quintessence of He Whom human beings reflect. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, people are the "patches of Godlight in the woods of our experience."

Rosh Hashanah is a day upon which we celebrate God's relationship with humanity, and our liturgy abounds with metaphors for that relationship; God is our father, our master, our parent, our king. Yet Rosh Hashanah is also intimately linked with the diverse relationships that human beings establish among themselves. *Aleph Tishrei* is, according to tradition, the day that Sarah and Chanah were granted children; when our forefathers Avraham and Yaakov were born; when Joseph was released from prison and began to reconcile with his brothers; when Adam and Eve first found each other in Eden. Our *tefilla* is all about God, but our Torah and *haftara* readings focus, in large part on fathers, mothers, siblings, spouses, children. God, I believe, made Rosh Hashanah a day in which we celebrate not only God's relationship with humanity, but also our relationships with one another, for it is through these relationships that we realize that we can embark on a new relationship with God. You see, if helping a fellow human being is exquisitely meaningful, and if loving someone for a lifetime can appear a period all too short, then we should be only too eager to enter into a relationship with a Benevolent Being Who declared His love for us at the beginning of time, and continues to love us onward into eternity.

God granted one of my prayers, four years ago; the woman who heard me speak agreed to tolerate a lifetime of sundry declamations and public speeches. And these days, while *davening* may not always be mesmerizing, nevertheless, when I think of the people important to me in my life, prayer itself comes to mean more. Whenever we stand silently in *shul*, preparing to pray, let's think about the people we care about most, who have sacrificed so much for us, or for whom we have sacrificed. Think about the patches of Godlight in your

life, and then begin to clamber up the branches, to the benevolent brilliance above.

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The Day the Blackberries Died

April 18, 2007: a day that will live in infamy. A technical problem at Research in Motion, the prominent company behind Blackberry, caused wireless reception to cease, and millions of professionals were cut off from any email access.

The *New York Times* reports on the havoc: "Stuart Gold was in Phoenix on a business trip when the service went down. Mr. Gold, the marketing director for Omniture, a software firm, is not proud of what happened next. 'I started freaking out,' he said. 'I started taking it apart. Turning it off. Turning it on. I took the battery out and cleaned it on my shirt. I was running around my hotel like a freak. It's very sad. I love this thing.'…Elaine Del Rossi, chief sales officer for an insurance company, reacted to the severed electronic leash with several panicked calls to her office. 'I quit smoking 28 years ago,' she said, 'and that was easier than being without my BlackBerry.'" The *Times* further notes that with people unable to receive email from work, many were free to actually spend time with their family. Or so one would have thought. Robert Friedman, president of a production company, said the disruption gave him "a lot of free time on my hands to spend with my wife, although I couldn't find her since her BlackBerry was off."

Now, the point of the *Times* piece is that the BlackBerry blackout revealed "just how professionally and emotionally dependent so many people had become on their pocket-size electronic lifelines." Beginning with the telephone, and ultimately the through cell phone or email, we are able to stay in touch with anyone anywhere, and we have grown used to this ability, taking it naturally for granted. And while the capacity for constant contact and communication appears to be a blessing, it has it detractors. Yale Law School's Stephen L. Carter notes that it has brought about the death of letter

writing, of correspondence, and that while through the inventions of the telephone, cell phone, and internet human communication has become easier, it has not necessarily become better. "Before the explosion in communications technology," writes Carter, "we had two means of keeping in touch with friends: stopping in for a visit or writing a letter. Each involved a significant investment of time and perhaps resources; in other words, maintaining friendships automatically called us to sacrifice. And, by making those sacrifices, we showed our friends repeatedly how greatly we valued their friendship. Correspondence, in particular, not only preserved and nurtured a relationship but provided a record of it, a testament to its enduring character." In other words, in an age in which we no longer communicate primarily through penmanship, all individuality, effort is lost. An email, no matter who it is from, is a hastily typed out bunch of bits and bytes in cyberspace, with no personality and no tangible nature. A letter, on the other hand, a letter from someone special, in his or her hand, painstakingly composed, and lovingly written, becomes an embodiment of its author, a constant and concrete reminder of the beloved. Through a letter a loved one continues to speak to us, if we hearken to the letter's words carefully enough.

It is with this in mind that we can consider one of the most extraordinary *aggados* of the Talmud. The *Gemara* in *Menachos* reports that when Moshe ascended to receive the Torah, he found God sitting with a *sofer*, a scribe, slowly writing out the Torah, carefully and painstakingly attaching *tagim*, the little lines on top of the letters, one by one. And Moshe asks him, "Who is forcing your hand to do this?" In other words, why are you taking the time and trouble to make such lovely letters. Just give us the information. You have a bunch of laws that you want us to keep, print it up, and I'll report it to *Klal Yisrael*. And God responds that, in the future, there will be a man named Akiva ben Yosef, who will deduce from every one of these letters, from every one of these tiny *tagim*, *tilei tilim shel halakhos*, tons and tons of exegetical insights.

The point of this story, as I understand it, is that God, upon giving us the Torah, wanted us to obey his laws, yes, but this was not merely a case of a boss sending around an office memo with a new series of directives. The Torah, the Talmud is trying to tell us, is God's letter to us; the Torah is his carefully crafted correspondence; the Torah is God's labor of love. And it is with this in mind that we can fully appreciate the Almighty's answer to Moshe. Like a letter from a loved one, every single one of these *osiyos*, every little line on these letters, will be treasured, and treated with enormous significance. For the Jews, the Torah was not a text-message or email to be hastily scrolled through or skimmed, to get the basic gist. There's an old line from Woody Allen: "I took a course in speed reading once. I read War and Peace in 10 minutes! It's about Russia." The Torah was not speed-read. The Jews pored over the Torah day after day, year after year, millennium after millennium, with new exegetical insights gleaned, new deductions discovered because they saw it as a treasured correspondence from a beloved. And just as a beloved speaks to us through a letter, God, the Jews believed, speaks to us through the Torah, teaching us new *chidushim* from generation to generation.

The phrase recited daily in *birkhos haTorah* is noteworthy; *barukh ata Hashem, hamelamed Torah le-amo Yisrael,* blessed are you God who teaches torah to Israel. A responsum from one of the *rishonim* once questioned whether this could possibly be the correct text. After all, God does not teach us Torah in the present, rather it is we who learn that text that was communicated millennia ago. But the answer, I would suggest, is that through a letter lovingly written, an author's voice can continue to be heard. An old Yiddish anecdote describes an illiterate father in a shtetl whose son went off to the big city. When the father received a letter from his son, he would go to the town store to find someone who could read Yiddish, and read him the letter. So he received a letter from his son, and he brought the letter to someone in the store, who opened it up, and read it quickly and matter-of-factly as follows: *Tateh ich darf a sach zachen.* I need a lot of stuff. *Shik mir gelt tateh*. Send

me money father. The father, affronted, says *azah chutzpah*, such disrespect, so demanding, *afilu kein ein pruta shik ich nit*, I'm not even sending him one cent. And then someone else in the store says no, you're not reading it right, give me the letter, and he takes the letter, and reads the exact same words, only slowly and in a soothing voice: *Tateh, ich darf a sach zachen, shik mir gelt tateh.* And the father, much impressed, says *yetzt ret er vi a mench,* now my son's talking with *derekh eretz*. In a letter, the voice of the letter-writer can be heard.

God continues to teach us because the Tanach is a love letter through which he speaks, if we listen carefully enough, and in the right way. In a lecture on *Torah min Hashamayim*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that Elijah, standing on Sinai centuries afters Moshe, hears God as a *kol demama dakka*, which he explains as a voice that you can hear only if you are listening for it hard enough. And it was because of this *kol*, he argues, that Jews were able to endure. In an age in which all prophecy—the ultimate wireless communication—was cut off, in an age of dispersion and persecution, in which all reception from Heaven seemed to cease, Jews focused on that text. In his words, the Torah "is God's letter to us. His way of saying: While our paths may diverge, there may be times when I am a long way away—read this letter I have written you and then I will be there with you. That is how Jews survived for 2000 years in exile, without ever once feeling abandoned by God because, so long as the Torah was with them, God was with them. That was His letter. That was the drama of the *kol demama daka.* That voice that we could hear if we listened hard enough. Wherever they were in Eastern Europe, in Spain, in Yemen—wherever they were, when they read Torah they heard the voice of God and they knew we were together. The Torah is not a conventional text at all. It is like a letter from a father to a child. That is the meaning of *Torah min Hashamayim.* What is Torah? Torah is the world we enter when, through an act of active listening, we hear the voice of God."

In an article in the *Weekly Standard*, the essayist Joseph Epstein writes with annoyance of how cell phones have changed what was once a quiet commute to work:

> Everyone, I suspect, has had a moment when he wished he could grab the cell phone from a boisterous talker and smash it on the sidewalk. A friend of mine named Ann Poole told me about sitting on a commuter train from her suburb into Chicago, in front of a young woman who made no fewer than ten cell phone calls to friends, explaining in great detail why she was changing the restaurant in which she was giving a lunch party that Saturday. Many of the people she called weren't in, so, in a loud and irritating voice, she left elaborate instructions on voice mail about the change in plan along with the reasons for the change. "Hi, this is Amy Hemstead [I'm making up the name], and I thought I'd let you know that I've changed the location of Saturday's lunch from the Zodiac Cafe to Phil Stefani's. We're still meeting at noon. . . . " And then she babbled on a bit more as my friend Ann, who fervently believes that trains are for reading not phoning, seethed in a quiet but genuine rage.
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> "Did you do anything about it?" I asked.
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> "I said nothing," she replied, "but when I got to work, I called Stefani's and, using dear Amy's name, I cancelled her reservation for Saturday."

We live in a noisy world; and often, enclosed in our cacophonous cocoon or sound, it is difficult for us to hear the voice of God. But what about *Shabbos,* when for one day we have silence? Recall the Verizon cell phone commercial's tagline: Can you hear me now? That is what God is saying to us in *shul* in *Shabbos.* What about now? When the ringing of the

cell phones cease, when the buzzing and beeping Blackberries are momentarily silenced, for the few precious hours before you open up an inbox laden with electronic letters, can you hear me now? When the Torah, my carefully crafted correspondence containing my *kol demama daka*, is read in *shul*, can you hear me now?

And of course we can—if only we are willing to listen.