

Reclaiming Conversations in a Digital Culture

Recently, I was out to dinner with my brother, and forced him into trying a new game called, “The Phone Stack.” Once we were seated, we both took out our cell phones, placed them face-down and stacked on the table. The first person to touch their phone during the dinner would have to pay the bill.

This game has become a new thing for those who struggle to disconnect from their phones. Neither of us reached for our phones during our meal, which I must say, for my brother, is the longest I’ve seen him in recent years without one in his hand. But to be fair, it’s not just he who has a problem. I, too, find myself rather attached to my iPhone.

The point of this game isn’t to get the other person to pay the bill, but rather to detach from the devices that distract us from having meaningful conversations. In that regard, the game was a success. We talked for over an hour without even a glance towards our phones. But, more importantly, we connected as brothers during that time in a way

that we haven't for quite some time, perhaps since before the invention of the iPhone, and I think that the timing isn't coincidental.

It seems silly that people should have to play Phone Stack in order to have a real conversation, but sadly, we have forgotten how to even have conversations.

This new conversational ineptness is more than just something that a few of us suffer from. We are seeing an emerging culture where face to face conversations are being replaced with Facebook conversations.

Where hours of talking on the phone has been replaced with texting back and forth and trying to decipher tone through emojis. Our coffee shops were once the place where people went to have conversations. Now we stand on line waiting for the barista while checking email, doing the New York Times mini cross word puzzle, and perhaps checking Instagram without even making eye contact with the people around us.

Nor do we drink coffee as a social experience; instead people open up their laptops, phones, and tablets and sip their caffeinated beverages in solitude. What has happened?

In case you think that this is just the new and different way of having conversations, and nothing is lost, I want to point you to some disturbing data. Psychologist Sara Konrath collated evidence from 72 studies to show that “over the past twenty years we’ve seen a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students, most of it within the past ten years.” She links this decline to the increase in usage of digital devices as a proxy for face to face interactions.

Shelly Turkle, who writes the book *“Reclaiming Conversations: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age,”* reported the experience of what many grade school teachers are observing, seventh graders aren’t reading social signals, they are less emotionally developed, they aren’t learning how to listen and fail to even look at their fellow classmates.

We might be great at analyzing what three dots at the end of a text message might mean, but younger generations are losing the ability to distinguish facial expressions. I don’t doubt that the same social digital habits that have been developing in our time, are likely linked to a decline in spiritual experiences as well.

There is a new word in Webster's Dictionary, "Phubbing." It means maintaining eye contact while texting. I've been told by a number of teenagers that they do it all the time, and it's not that hard. I haven't developed this skill, nor do I plan on trying. You know what the most common expression we hear when talking to someone who is phubbing or even just someone on their phone? "Wait, what?" That's right. I think our goal should be to deeply connect with each other, without the presence of phones or any technology.

By the way, studies show that the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. Conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present.

Phone stack isn't the game we should be playing at dinner. Our phones should be both out of sight, and out of reach. The best predictor of a child's success, according to one study in child development, is the

number of meals that they have with their family. But that is, of course, only if they are actually having a conversation with their family at the dinner table, and not while watching TV or an iPad.

I want to make something clear. I am not anti-technology. For those of you who know me, I'm anything but a luddite. I like to have the newest gizmos and gadgets, and I love embracing new technological trends. I'm not anti-technology, I am pro-conversation. I want to re-infuse conversations into the heart of our culture, and into the heart of our community here. And here's why: I think connecting through face to face conversations is the most needed pathway for us to discover spirituality and God.

The Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber has a label for the profound face to face encounters that we have with each other. He calls these I-Thou moments. Buber teaches that these encounters occur when two or more people enter into a relationship with each other, caring for one another, loving each other, and transforming each other. There is a mystical quality to this experience, some kind of ineffable chemistry that materializes when others connect in this transformative way. We can

discover God in these encounters. Moreover, that inexplicable force that fuels this spiritual connection, that IS God, according to Buber!

When sitting down with another person over coffee, these kind of I-Thou connections are made, and they are nurtured. I admit that one of the most common places I find God is over a cup of Starbucks coffee (this is not an advertisement for Starbucks; I actually find that their coffee is too bitter). But the opposite of “phubbing” might just be having an I-Thou connection with another person over a cup of coffee. I will come out and say, I don’t think you can have an I-Thou moment with another individual via text message.

I want to give you an example of what an I-Thou moment looks like in the Torah. In the book of Genesis, when Jacob sees his brother Esau for the first time in twenty years, he has a divine encounter. The two estranged twins have a bitter relationship based on enmity, jealousy, and trickery. But something holy brings the two of them together for this reunion. Jacob lifts up his eyes and sees, his brother Esau. Esau runs to see Jacob, and they embrace while shedding bittersweet tears. So moved by this moment, Jacob exclaims: רְאִיתִי פְנֵיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים

seeing you face to face is like seeing the face of God (Genesis 33:10). This encounter transforms the lives of Jacob and Esau. They discover God in the moments of embrace, and the moments of reconciliation. Face to face moments like this occur in real time; they occur between individuals who see you as flesh and not as pixels or letters.

I want us to reimagine for a second, the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son Isaac. God tells Abraham to go sacrifice his son, so Abraham takes his son on a three day journey to a place where this is all supposed to happen. They have three days together on this journey. Three days of talking time to bond with one another, to connect in their relationship, to talk about God, to share their feelings.

Seemingly, for the first three days, Isaac and Abraham say nothing to one another. On day three, Isaac asks, "If we're going to make a sacrifice, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham responds, "God will provide the lamb, my son." And they continue walking, Isaac seemingly oblivious to his father's intentions.

I find this story a bit unbelievable. That's all that Isaac says to his father in the three days that they're together? It's almost as if Isaac is

“phubbing” while he’s talking to his father. “God will provide the sacrifice, and it’s you my son.... wait what?” (making texting gesture). Either Abraham is a great actor, or Isaac is so disconnected emotionally from his father, that he doesn’t realize that his father plans to kill him!

When there is no empathy for the other, we can’t truly have a conversation. And if we are distracted by the empathy blocking devices around us, our talk becomes trivial and meaningless.

For starters, we need to carve out moments in our lives when we are completely disconnected from technology. If you’re in this tent right now, and your phone is resting in your open prayerbook as if you were following along, but really you’re checking email, on Facebook, or texting— even if you’re tweeting about how great the Jewish Center of the Hamptons is, you’ve got a problem.

In case you didn’t catch the announcement, we ask that our sacred spaces be cell phone free so that we can foster spiritual moments. We even have cell phone sleeping bags on the table at the entrance of the tent to help you put your phones away. Judaism even builds a time into our every week to remove the distractions from life and focus on the

things that are most important, we call it Shabbat. There is even an expression called Shabbos Talk, where we talk about important things in life, and avoid the trivial.

I'm going to venture to say that spirituality doesn't happen when we witness the world through the barrier of a screen. Too often, I find people so focused on capturing the extraordinary moments around them on camera, that they never really get to experience the moment itself, only the recording of the moment.

Concerts have become moments for people to pay hundreds of dollars per ticket only to capture a poor quality video and audio recording that is so blurry, you wouldn't even want to share it with your friends. Have you missed a fireworks show because you were trying to get a great photo on your phone? Have you needed to ask the person next to you what happened in the movie or TV show that you're watching because you were too busy writing a witty Facebook post?

We are so obsessed with screens, that we miss the one in front of us that we were supposed to be focused on!

Let's experience moments, not capture them.

In case it's not clear, I'm preaching to myself a little bit. I am part of the generation that are the most addicted to their cell phones. And I don't think a sermon alone will change my behavior, nor may it be enough to change yours.

For the next month, I have deleted Facebook and Instagram from my phone, and deactivated my social media accounts. If this sermon resonates with you, I would encourage you to try doing the same, or perhaps suggest it to someone you feel could benefit from a social media break.

I want to make sure that I spend quality time with my children, my family, my friends, and the community here, and connect with everyone on the deepest level possible. I want to strengthen my conversations, to reengage with developing those sacred I-Thou relationships that have been diminished by the digital climate around us. I'm always happy to grab coffee, a drink, or golf with congregants, just give me a call, or in this instance, it's ok to send me an email. I want to connect with each and every one of you and have sacred conversations without technology present.

And this year, you'll see the Jewish Center continue to be a beacon for the conversations that are lacking in most other places. We're going to talk about the existential questions of life. We'll be studying the rich texts of our tradition through sacred conversation. We're going to talk from the pulpit and off the pulpit about the issues facing our country and community. We're going to have Shabbat dinners where the table draws us into relationship and conversation with each other.

Conversations don't just matter, they are central to what it means to be Jewish, and what it means to be in community with each other. Let's reclaim the art of the conversation together.

—Shanah Tovah