

## Idolatry – Yom Kippur 5780

I want to talk about idolatry today. Yes, of all things, idolatry. The Torah spends much time speaking against idolatry. We may feel that these sections do not really apply to us though. None of us are bowing down to images of animals or to the sun and moon. However, I want to suggest that there is a particular type of idolatry that we do practice, myself included. To discuss this, we have to ask, essentially, what is idolatry? It is giving an object a power over us that it does not inherently have. Idolatry involves giving control of ourselves over to an outside object. It is saying that some “**thing**” has more importance to us than everything else we tend to value. Do we do this? Our ancestors were susceptible to the temptation of idolatry. Do we fall into a similar trap?

I think we do. The problem is our mobile devices and how we use them. They are our new idols. We give our smartphones and laptops a power which they do not inherently have. And we tend to use them in a way that prompts us push aside our other values. These values include the desire to be good friends and to help our children develop into the people we wish they would be.

As of 2016, the average American adult looked at their phone every six and a half minutes. One fourth of American teenagers were connected to a phone within five minutes of waking up. The majority of teenagers sent out one hundred texts a day. Eighty percent went to sleep with their phones. Forty-four percent never “unplugged,” even when in religious services or playing a sport or exercising.

Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, writes about the effects of cell phone and laptop use on how we communicate with each other. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, she explains that we have moved away from direct conversations with other people. We seem to be talking all the time. We text, post, and chat. But something is

off. We feel more comfortable in the world of screens than being directly in touch with other people. We seem to turn to our phones instead of other people, even when we are among family and friends, colleagues and lovers. In our moments of honesty, we readily admit that we prefer to send an email or a text than to commit to a face-to-face conversation.

Professor Turkle argues that these trends come together as a flight from conversation, at least the type that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas and let ourselves be vulnerable and present. The problem is that that these conversations are the ones which allow empathy and intimacy to develop. Research demonstrates that the people who use social media the most have trouble reading human emotions, including their own. However, the same research shows that face-to-face conversation leads to a greater ability to deal with others and better self-esteem. Spontaneous and open-ended conversations also allow collaboration in education and business to grow.

We are hiding from each other as we are continually connected to each other. In electronic communication, we are tempted to represent ourselves as we would like to be instead of who we are. We compose, edit, and improve our writing so we explicitly present the image we want to give. Being pulled by both our desire to express an authentic self and the pressure to show our best selves on-line leads to a situation in which frequent use of social media brings on feelings of depression and social anxiety

The question that comes up is why do we spend so much time sending messages if we end up feeling less connected? Because, in the short term, digital communication makes us feel more in charge of how we use our time. It also makes feel like we have more power over how we present ourselves. If we are texting instead of talking, we can control how much communication occurs. Furthermore, we can edit and retouch our messages and posts to present ourselves how we want to appear. Turkle

calls this the Goldilocks effect: we want to be in touch with each other, but only at a digital distance, not too close, not too far, just right.

Many people express the idea that they would rather text than talk. Turkle believes they are expressing a dislike for open-ended conversations rather than just saying they prefer text. In general, including for intimate matters, they would prefer to send a text than talk on the phone or talk face-to-face. However, a study asked pairs of college-aged friends to communicate four ways: face-to-face conversation, video chat, audio chat, and instant messaging. In person-communication created the most emotional connection, and online messaging brought the least. The students tried to make their messages warmer by using emoticons, typing out the sounds of laughter, and using all caps, but none of these techniques worked. We are most human to each other when we see each other's faces and listen to each other's voices.

Now, you may say that this is common sense, but there is another factor at work. We are enchanted by technology and forget our common sense. We fall into thinking that being connected continuously is going to make us less lonely. But we are actually doing more damage. If we cannot be really alone, we will feel lonelier. Also, if we do not teach our children how to be alone, they will only know to be lonely. But many adults and children feel anxious without a continual feed of online stimulation.

We say that we bring out our phones when we are "bored." But we often find ourselves bored because we have become used to the continual feed of connection, information, and entertainment that the phones provide. We are always someplace else. In classrooms, business meetings, and even in synagogue, we pay attention to what interests us. When we lose interest, we turn to our phones to find something that does interest us. This trend is a problem since we do some of our most productive thinking when we are bored. It has been demonstrated that we get a

neurochemical high from connecting. We also crave a feeling of being “constantly on” that keeps us from performing our best.

Part of the problem is that we are uncomfortable if we are left alone with our thoughts, even for a short period of time. Turkle describes one experiment in which people were asked to sit quietly without a phone or a book for fifteen minutes. In the beginning of the experiment, they were also asked if they would consider giving electric shocks to themselves if they became bored. Subjects said no way, they would not consider it. However, after six minutes, many of them were shocking themselves.

If you look around, you will notice that our social patterns have changed. We want to be with each other but connected to wherever else we want to be, because we want control over where we place our attention. Manners have changed to meet this new focus. When you go out with friends, you cannot not assume that you have your friends’ undivided attention. Turkle has found that when college students go to dinner, they want to be with their friends, but they also want to have the ability to turn to their phones. Many practice what is called the “rule of three”: when you are at dinner you need to make sure that at least three people have their heads up from their phones before you allow yourself to look down at your phone. Conversation continues, but with different people looking up at different times. This practice creates fragmented conversation. Also, everyone tries to keep the conversation at a light level.

Research shows that the mere presence of a phone on a table (even if it is not on) changes what people discuss. If we think that we might be interrupted, we stick to light conversation and subjects of little importance and little controversy. The phone just being there blocks empathic connection. If two people are talking and there is a phone nearby, each person feels less attached to the other person than when there is no phone around. Even a silent phone interrupts our connecting.

We also have much faith in the merits of multitasking through our devices. During the dinner hour, the ordinary American family is handling six or seven simultaneous streams of information. All around them are tablets, laptops, phones, desktops, and television. College students who are using one form of media are likely to be using four at the same time. The problem with this is that multitasking both degrades our performance while making us feel as if we are doing better at everything. Frequent multitasking is associated with social anxiety, depression, and difficulty in reading emotions.

And, we have cause to worry about our children. Children text each other rather than talk face-to-face with friends. They turn to their phones instead of daydreaming. Children are not learning to have real conversations and develop empathy. Time with a computer program only teaches them how to interact with computers. Time with people instructs them how to be in a relationship.

Turkle explains that parents complain that children do not talk with them at mealtimes because the children are interacting with their phones. However, children have the same criticism of their parents. Parents answer that children do not have a right to criticize them this way. Then, children go back to their phones during meals. No one is happy with this stand-off. Turkle stresses that it is not good enough to just ask your children to put down their phones. Parents have to model this behavior and put away their own phones.

I know you may be thinking “but I need to always carry my phone in case of an emergency.” People argue that they never want to go out with their phones in case there is an emergency. But the real emergency may be parents and children not having conversations or having enough silence that allows the time for one of them to mention a funny story or a troubling thought.

What is most disturbing is that several generations of children have grown up expecting parents and other caretakers to be only half there. Many parents text at breakfast and dinner. Parents and babysitters ignore children when they take them to parks and playgrounds. The adults are not modeling the skills of maintaining a relationship or conversation. Studies demonstrate that when children hear less adult talk they speak less. If we are looking at our phones instead of our children, we are putting them at a disadvantage that they will not know they have. Relationship skills are also the skills that allow a person to have empathy. In the past twenty years, there has been found a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students. The majority of that decrease has happened in the last ten years. Researchers connect this to the prevalence of digital communication.

We are abandoning our values through the way we use technology. None of us believe that we should ignore our children. All of us want them to develop into people who can demonstrate empathy. However, we get pulled into using our devices and find ourselves behaving in a way that does not promote our values. We are letting our devices have a power over us that they do not inherently have. Our new idols.

Turkle explains that the first generation of kids that grew up with smartphones is graduating from college. Though they are bright and talented, employers report that they come into the workforce with unexpected phobias and anxieties. They are not skilled in starting or ending conversations. These employees have problems in keeping eye contact. They also state that they are made anxious by talking on the telephone.

Fortunately, there is a solution to these problems. The solution is more conversation. We can bounce back. Research shows that children who go to a summer camp that does not allow the kids to use electronic devices in five days show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their

ability to tell the feelings of others by viewing videos and photos of people's faces.

Furthermore, our Jewish values promote conversation. For example, traditional Jewish study is done in conversation. When Jews study holy texts, they do so in pairs called chavruta. We do not learn by ourselves sitting over a book in isolation. Rather, we study while reading and talking with our study partner who is sitting across from us. Please note that perhaps the holiest act we do, study, is done within the structure of a conversation. We hear G-d by studying our texts. We do this in conversation, not alone.

Turkle suggests that we do not have to give up our phones. If we understand their strong effect on us, we can approach them with greater intention and choose to live differently with them.

She makes suggestions about how we should interact with technology. I will mention some of them. The first is to remember the power of our phones. They are not just accessories. They are psychologically potent devices that both alter what we do and who we are. It is good to get out of the habit of bringing a phone into every situation. The phone's presence makes the statement that your attention is divided, even if you do not want it to be. It will place limits on the conversation, what will be brought up, how you will listen, and the level of connection you feel.

Turkle also suggests that we slow down. Some of the most important conversations we have are with ourselves. We need to slow down from the speed of online life to do this.

The really Jewish suggestion she gives is to make sacred spaces for conversation, such as no devices at dinner, in the kitchen, or in the car. She suggests that parents start this idea with children early, so it does not come out as something punitive but rather as a part of family culture. I say

this suggestion is really Jewish since our tradition includes the idea that there are sacred times and spaces, ones for which we put aside some of our daily habits and behaviors. Each week we are given the opportunity to unplug. Shabbat is designated as a time that we refrain from working and other parts of our everyday life. Shabbat would be a great time to create both physical and temporal space for conversation while laying down our electronic devices. Now, I have been a rabbi for long enough to know that I am not going to convince people to take on the whole Shabbat package with a sermon. However, I ask you to at least walk away with the idea that our tradition believes that stopping our normal behavior at times can be a good thing. We can set times or spaces in which we are without our devices and turn to each other. The time we set does not have to be Friday night or Saturday for these breaks. We can insert them whenever and wherever makes sense for our families.

We have a choice. How are we going to relate to our technology? Will our behavior reflect our values? Please know that I am not trying to be judgmental by asking these questions. I too am guilty of the same things I have mentioned. I carry a cell phone. I always want to be accessible to congregants. I hate the idea that Deborah might not be able to reach me if there is a problem with our daughter Chloe. However, I have a history of using my phone too much when I am with other people, including my daughter. When Deborah and I used to go on dates, I would hand her my phone so I would not look at it too much. By the way, I did not even know what I was always looking for. And talking with my wife is one of my favorite things to do.

I know it is extreme to categorize our use of cell phone and social media as a new form of idolatry. Particularly with how much of a sin our tradition considers idolatry. But I think it is helpful to recognize that our heritage is aware that we can become so enamored with the objects we own that we let them take over. We can treat them as if they have a power they do not



deserve. And our relationship with them can pull us away from our real values.

May we, in the year ahead, reflect our true values in the moments that matter by not turning to our phones when we really need to turn to each other.