

Beha'alotecha 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/10/17

I have to admit that one of the more challenging aspects of my job here at Beth El is getting people not to use their cell phones in the building on Shabbat. We put up signs, but a lot of the time it does not seem to help. And really, it's not fun being a Grinch. I don't want to be that cranky old man who makes people stop doing something they want to do. And yet, I enforce the rule, and you know what - the more I do, the better I feel about it. I want this to be the one place where, for one day - for just a couple of hours - everyone present needs to be present. Not taking pictures and sending them to someone who is not here. Not stepping away from what's going on around us to send a text or make a call to someone who is not here, but to be fully present with the folks who are here - and to be more fully present with ourselves. When you can't use your cell phone you need to be here and only here, and this is vitally important because there is no electronic substitute for good conversation. In conversation you not only learn about the other person in real time, you also learn about yourself. Unlike e-mails, or even texts that can be edited, conversations show us to be who we really are. We can't edit or delete; what you say, and hear, and feel are all in real time. By relying on electronic communication we are denying ourselves important insight - about ourselves and about others.

I went to a wedding the other night, and as luck would have it, I was seated next to an old friend I had not spoken to face-to-face with in some time. We'd e-mailed every once in a while, but even though our kids grew up together, and we were once much closer, we had not had a real conversation in a long time. And, as luck would have it, the music was not too loud and we could talk to each other without shouting. Now there are people who ask you, "So how's life?" and you say "fine; work is good, the kids are good, blah blah blah..." But there are other people who, when they ask, "So how's life?" you really want to tell them. And so you get in a good conversation, like the one I had with my friend that day, and you know what - not only did I learn a lot about his life, I really learned more about my own. You know, when you are talking, I mean really in conversation, it's interesting to see what you choose to share and the way you share it. It tells YOU a lot about what's going on in your own life. And if he or she is a good listener, the follow up questions take you both even deeper. And that's the way I felt last Sunday - like it was time well spent - for both of us. Insightful - for both of us. I don't know about you, but I learn a lot about myself talking to others in good conversation.

As many of you know, I went back to school following my ordination and got my degree in counseling because more people were coming to me asking, "Why is my life so difficult?" than "Is this chicken kosher?" Inevitably, everyone who studies counseling and psychology learns early on of the work of Carl Rogers whose talk therapy is founded on this very idea: that by sharing our life story with another person we learn a great deal about ourselves. A good therapist reframes what we have said to give us even keener insight into what's going on inside our hearts and minds. And so as I sat down to study this week's Torah portion, it occurred to me that, in a sense, the same thing is going on in Moses's life in his conversation with Gd...The Torah portion starts nice enough - more talk of dedicating the new Tabernacle in all its splendor. But then the bottom falls out for Moses. It gets really bad. The people start complaining, again, only this time Moshe gets overwhelmed, to the point where he says, "If this is my life, Gd, then just kill me now." Really, that's what he says. But the strange thing is that only eight verses later, he's fine. More than fine, he's calm and in charge once again. He's back to being his old self. WHAT HAPPENED? What changed him? The answer is that he talked it out. He talked it out with Gd. They had a conversation, and in presenting his side to Gd, Moshe learned a lot about himself. I think he realized how over-emotional, even irrational he was being, and as soon as Gd presented another way of looking at the problem Moshe's whole attitude changed. Suddenly it wasn't so bad after all. Hearing his own words in conversation

changed Moshe's whole self-assessment and approach to life. He found a healthy alternative to the way he was thinking and he was able to move on...

And THAT is exactly what our kids - and we - are missing when we let technology stand in the way of conversation. Technology compromises our ability for self-reflection, and self-reflection is the bedrock of personal growth and development. Human relationships, including the inner relationship we have with ourselves, are rich, and revealing, and messy, and demanding. And when we avoid them because we are on a phone instead of engaging with the people around us we are actually shortchanging ourselves. We are not only denying ourselves insight into their lives, but into our own! No amount of texts or e-mails, no matter how long the e-mail or text chain is, can add up to one good conversation. They just can't.

So I'll go on being the cranky old Rabbi who reminds people not to use a cell phone on Shabbat because I am a spiritual leader, and helping us to develop richer spiritual lives is what I do - what we do as a community. So don't simply refrain from using your cell phone in this building today out of respect for Shabbat and our community, set it aside, leave it in your car out of respect for yourself. Be present, be here, live in this moment, with these people, if only for an hour or two. Then maybe you'll want to carve out more time like this; maybe you'll have a deeper understanding of why we are so insistent; and maybe, just maybe you'll want to disengage from technology every week on Shabbat. It is indeed truly liberating. We turn our focus inward, here and now as we rise for the Musaf service...