

**“Robots and The Good Life.”**

Many of us have that special place where our families retreat or re-energize. For my family, that place has always been Mammoth Lakes up in the Sierra mountains. I have carried each of our three children up and down the trails in our well-worn child carrier. Now, of course, whichever of our children is free to join us in Mammoth, waits impatiently at the top of every turn of the trail for me and Davida to catch up.

Mammoth is very much a chronicle of our family. From infant carriers to mountain biking, from pre-adolescents in braces to college and beyond. All captured on film, then digital camera, and now on anyone's phone.

Actually, more than anything, it may be the phone that tells the story. When we first got away to Mammoth, there was one hard-wired phone. We gave out the number for emergencies. It was before there was Internet or email – and we were, for all intents and purposes, disconnected. Then, I acquired my first cell phone. It was the size of a brick. I had to walk down the road to get one bar – it was hardly worth the effort. Fast forward to this summer. Mammoth recently installed a big cell tower and now we have blazing 4g Internet, email, and texting. Even on the most secluded trail, full bars! As Micah, Davida, and I were making the climb up to Emerald Lake, we heard the rush of the river and, ding, ding – is that me? Is that you? Whose phone?

This is our new wired world! Not only is it the end of Mammoth as my family used to experience it, but for all of us, the beginning of a new frontier that we are only beginning to understand as a society.

Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, has been studying the effects of this technology since the very beginning of personal computing. Her most recent book is appropriately called, “Alone Together.” The title itself speaks volumes.

Our culture, our social etiquette, our way of managing tasks have all changed us in good ways and bad. Dr. Turkle sums it up beautifully:

Mobile technology has made each of us ‘pauseable.’ Our face-to-face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages. In the world of paper mail, it was unacceptable for a colleague to read his or her correspondence during a meeting. In the new etiquette, turning away from those in front of you to answer a mobile phone or respond to a text has become close to the norm.

So many of us are now tethered to our phones. It's a furious race each day to keep up with all the emails, texts, and voicemails that flood in. I see you in our

offices, cramming in that last email or phone call before coming in for a meeting with the rabbi or cantor. I see our teens, with their parents or friends, constantly texting.

In case you were wondering, according to CNN, the average teenager sends 3,339 texts a month. In fact, the typical teenager now does homework while engaging in a steady stream of texting, Skype and Facebook. This is the new normal, and just try asking your sixteen year old to disconnect!

We are becoming a society of multitaskers – juggling all manner of incoming and outgoing! We feel productive, empowered, and quite exhausted by the end of the day.

But, as Dr. Turkle points out, we may not be doing ourselves any favors. It turns out that that when we multitask, we don't perform as well on any single task. We may be doing a lot of things at once, but we're not doing any one of them as well as we could if we did them individually.

So why do we work this way? Part of the answer is, multitasking is, in fact, a drug. As Dr. Turkle writes:

Multitasking feels good because the body rewards it with neurochemicals that induce a multitasking 'high.' The high deceives multitaskers into thinking they are being especially productive. In search of the high, they want to do even more.

The whole question of technology and artificial intelligence has major implications for our future. How is it going to change the way we do things? How is it going to affect our families and our relationships?

On the one hand, it can certainly make us more efficient communicators, and put a lot of information at our fingertips. But, on the other hand, we are sacrificing personal contact and time together. We are becoming partial avatars – spending more time online in virtual relationships, and spending less time as human beings interacting in the non-virtual space, or what you and I used to call, reality!

And as artificial intelligence evolves further, there will be even greater challenges. Have you yet heard of "sociable robots?" Yes, they already exist. The Japanese have engineered Paro, a furry baby seal the size of a large lap dog. Paro is filled with sensors to be able to physically and verbally respond to sound, light, touch, and positioning. Paro is designed for therapeutic use, mainly in nursing homes and hospitals. Lonely patients can have emotional connection with Paro, who responds to their firm or soft petting, to angry or happy speech and even has a large preprogrammed vocabulary that it can understand. For those who have no visitors or friends, Paro is a \$6000 replacement that can be loved, and seem to give love back in return.

But, this is only the tip of the iceberg. In the not too distant future, sociable robots will become far more sophisticated and realistic, with many human like abilities and personality traits. In her research, Dr. Turkle came across one graduate student who was persistent in wanting to know how far along we are in creating human look alike robots to serve as our companions. She then confided that if a robot could emulate caring behavior, she would trade in her boyfriend. She was looking for a no-hassle relationship. In ways large and small, sociable robots can and will replace human connection.

So, yes, technology is designed to make our lives better. But the question is, what does better mean? To couch it in philosophical terms, what is the good life, and can “Siri” and her “friends” help us achieve it?

In fact, the question of the “good life” is ages old. Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher, was actually killed for his answer. Socrates lived amid the opulence of Athens during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. And it would be an understatement to say he was a thorn in the side of Greek culture, which centered around physical beauty, material wealth, and all the external trappings of power. He was all about cultivating the inner person – the heart, the mind, and the soul – and famously wrote that, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” When he was put on trial for supposedly corrupting the youth with his ideas, he stuck his finger in the eye of Athens, as all of Greece, including Plato, looked on. In his legendary defense, he railed against the court:

Men of Athens, I love and respect you, but I will obey God rather than you. ...Are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom, and truth, and improvement of the soul?” ...I tell you that virtue is not given *by* money, but that *from* virtue comes money and every other good, public and private. This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine that corrupts the youth, I am indeed a mischievous person.

In retrospect, I’m not sure who was on trial. The aristocracy of Athens thought they were trying Socrates, but really it would seem that Socrates put Greece on trial. In the end, he chose to drink the fatal cup of Hemlock rather than give up his principles, but his stinging words remain very much alive and speak to directly us today.

The quest for affluence, power, or physical beauty is not a worthy end in itself. As those of us who’ve been around for awhile know well, both fame and beauty are fleeting. And, as for wealth, our modern studies only confirm what Socrates knew a long time ago – that lots of money doesn’t equate with happiness. Every study has shown that once we have enough to live comfortably, greater wealth doesn’t increase our feeling of well-being. In fact, sometimes it even has the opposite affect.

David Myers, a social psychologist and author of a book called, “The Pursuit of Happiness,” calls this the American paradox. He has documented the near doubling of personal wealth in American since the 1950’s, along with simultaneously declining rates of happiness, and this is what he concludes:

I have called this soaring wealth and shrinking spirit “the American paradox.” More than ever, we at the end of the last century were finding ourselves with big houses and broken homes, high incomes and low morale... We were excelling at making a living but too often failing at making a life. We celebrated our prosperity but yearned for purpose. We cherished our freedoms but longed for connection. In an age of plenty, we were feeling spiritual hunger.

So, as we consider the question of what makes life good, we have to wonder where we are headed? Yes, Twitter increases our public exposure, texting keeps people in our orbit, Facebook makes us look interesting and stand out to others, and email keeps us productive and efficient. But to what end? Sucking up every spare minute we have, isolating us from the person sitting right next to us, absorbing all our thoughts and energy – is this the good life? More work to fill our days, nights, and weekends? Constant connectivity and no escape from incoming? Social media obsession and paranoid FOMO – “Fear of Missing Out? These may add to our influence, our friends list, or our bank accounts, but do they bring us greater love, satisfaction, health, spirituality?

We seriously need to ask ourselves whether this is Athens, Greece all over again! And we need to ask now, because tomorrow the next invention is coming out and we better have a handle on how we’re living and how we will choose to deploy our latest and greatest gadgets. Will we control them, or will they control us?

Now it’s fair to ask why I’m raising this issue tonight/today on Yom Kippur. And the answer is, because the message of Yom Kippur has something important to teach us here. And it begins with this premise. It may sound a bit jarring, but according to our tradition, Yom Kippur is essentially conceived as a rehearsal for our death. We wear white, just as we’re buried in white tachrichim; we confess our sins in the Vidui prayer, as one does before death; we refrain from eating and enjoying the pleasures of life; and, like in our eulogy, we take stock of what our lives have amounted to.

So it is, in this context, that I can tell you I have never sat by anyone’s deathbed and heard them say, I wish I could fire off one more business email or update my Facebook status. At the moment people confront their death, they look at such things as non-essential – affluence, prestige, physical beauty, even a full inbox become insignificant. They realize that these external trappings of life we labor

so hard to attain and keep are, in the words of Ecclesiastes, “vanity of vanities and a chasing after wind.”

But what *does* matter at such a time? The family and friends who are sitting at our bedside. Words of love and affection. Physical touch and human contact. A feeling that one is an important part of a family, a friendship, a community. A sense of satisfaction that one has acquired and passed on some wisdom, done some small good in the world. And a feeling of serenity that comes from a practiced inner spiritual life. These are the things that bring comfort and create a legacy. These are the ultimate accomplishments on which we focus and to which honor is paid.

And every one of these things take time to develop – extended, uninterrupted, dedicated time. Time disconnected from our devices and distractions. Time to read. Time to think. Time to take walks and contemplate who we are and where we are going in life. Time to really *be* with the people in our lives – fully engaged with them.

Martin Buber, the great modern Jewish thinker once said: “All real living is meeting.” You and I, not two avatars communicating in a virtual space, but you and I locked eye to eye, and heart to heart in meeting – in Buber’s words, fully turned toward one another.

So what is the good life? I would say that this is precisely what we need to be thinking about on Yom Kippur – taking this time to contemplate and evaluate our marriages, our family relationships, our physical well being and inner spiritual life, our intellectual pursuits, our engagement in community with others. Are we devoting the time to each of these that they deserve? Or are we too distracted by the ring and ding of our computers and cell phones? Do we use our technology as a necessary tool to support the achievements that matter in our lives, or has technology fueled in us unhealthy obsessions and habits, increased our appetite for vain attainments, and created hiding places from ourselves and from others?

We cannot turn the clock back. Artificial intelligence will only grow in power, sociable robots will become more realistic, and new frontiers of virtual reality are almost beyond what we can imagine today. This is the future that we and our children will have to embrace. And it can be glorious and wondrous and exciting. As long as we remember that a Paro robot cannot replace our visit to the nursing home or hospital. As long as we remember that even a human-like robot cannot replace a boyfriend. As long as we remember that our virtual self is not real, and our online life is not living.

As we rehearse death, as we face our mortality on Yom Kippur, our great realization is that time is precious. Yehuda Amichai, Israel’s poet laureate,

contemplated this before his own premature death from cancer, and sounded a warning to all of us:

A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.  
He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes  
was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,  
to make love in war, and war in love.

Amichai's prescient admonition is that just living, and experiencing, and being present here in the real world, requires enough multi-tasking. So, as you and I spend the day reflecting on how we measure up to "the good life," I would ask us to make a pact. A pact that when we leave this sanctuary and reboot our cell phones and computers, and our robots (if you happen to have one), it will be for one purpose – as tools to further our good and worthy pursuits, and not as a distraction or a subtraction from the living that truly matters.

As it is, we don't have time in our lives "to have time for everything." But, we can use the time we have, for a good life and a better world.