

Disconnect to Re-connect

Yom Kippur 2010 Rabbi Jeffrey Summit

I realized that recently, I crossed the line. You see, I've always been a fan of technology. I love my iPhone. I love my Macbook Air: I can take it with me everywhere. I don't have an iPod: I have four iPods. A big one, a little one, one in my car, and of course, my iPhone, which is also an iPod. But it's gotten out of hand. I get up in the morning, roll out of bed and immediately check my email. If I want to concentrate on writing something, I have to disable our wireless network at home because I don't have the self control not to go on line. And it's not just me, yesterday I was running on Comm Ave and saw a guy talking on his cell phone while he was running. Now, that's just wrong. Yom Kippur is a time when we are called to think very carefully about what is right and what is wrong in our lives. A day set apart to atone and consider what it means to construct the best life we can live, a life with love, balance and fulfillment. On Yom Kippur, we apologize and re-connect with people. But what if part of the problem is that we are *too* connected? What if we are living a life where our multiple connections constantly pull us in too many directions. I understand the word "atonement" by breaking it down to "at-one-ment. But what if we have chosen to live in a way where we feel fragmented, hardly at one with ourselves? How do we establish some balance in our lives and what might Judaism say about that?

This is one of the years when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbat and so we have a double header. The rabbis call Yom Kippur “Shabbat HaShabbaton,” the Sabbath of all Sabbaths: a day to really put on the brakes, to fully cease, take ourselves out of regular life, to contemplate, connect to our deepest selves. This is an opportunity to assess what we need to do, what we need to change, in the year to come. I want to take advantage of this Yom Kippur Shabbat to speak with you about a new movement in Jewish life, started by a group of young Jews, artists and writers, who call themselves “Reboot” and who developed what they call “The Shabbat Manifesto.” These Jews developed this idea in the same spirit as the Slow Food movement (something I’ve been taking about for years when I encourage people to “eat slowly” at Shabbat). Slow food is the opposite of fast food. Food, they say, should be real, tasty, local and enjoyed with friends and family leisurely with fun, deep conversation. At a time when so many of us live life in the fast lane, the appeal of slowing down so we have more time for the people and things we love, even a little time for ourselves, is really appealing.

Now, before I start, I first want to recognize that there is a major problem with me giving this drash. There are many people here, and I know that because I’ve talked with them, who will quickly think, “Oh, he’s talking about the importance of Shabbat, of taking a break. Yes, I totally know and value that. It’s a wonderful idea. Yes, I remember that time I did that on Birthright in Israel, or years ago when I visited friends who are Orthodox, but realistically, my life is just too busy. Maybe someday, but really, am I going to turn off my cell phone for a full day? Am I going to not check email for 24 hours? People will think I’ve been

kidnapped. And besides, who am I hurting if I check my email, or update Facebook or set aside several hours to go on the computer and catch up on work?

But what I want to share on this Yom Kippur Shabbat, is that by constantly being digitally connected, we are losing more than we are gaining and lots of people are talking about this now. Perhaps you've heard of the book "Hamlet's Blackberry" where author William Powers writes that "Much of what used to be called free time is now colonized by our myriad connective obligations and so is no longer free." Powers calls our current state of affairs "digital maximalism" and writes that since "connecting via screens is good. The more you connect the better...The goal is no longer to be 'in touch' but to erase the possibility of ever being out of touch." The result, we live in a state of continual partial attention where we lose depth and focus in our friendships and our lives.

The beauty of the Shabbat Manifesto is that it reframes how we can approach a very old idea in a new way. When many people think about "being Shomer Shabbat" they go right to the hallmarks of traditional observance: Don't drive a car, don't turn lights off and on, do go to synagogue and while I'm happy to have long conversations with everyone here about why I think those ways of observance can be deeply meaningful, many people here have already decided that's not how you are going to connect to Shabbat. But we need this, now, more than ever. That's why I like how Reboot describes "The Shabbat Manifesto."

On their webpage, Reboot writes about the project like this: “Way back when, God said, “On the seventh day thou shalt rest.” The meaning behind it was simple: Take a break. Call a timeout. Find some balance. Recharge.

Somewhere along the line, however, this mantra for living faded from modern consciousness. The idea of unplugging every seventh day now feels tragically close to impossible. Who has time to take time off? We need eight days a week to get tasks accomplished, not six.

The Sabbath Manifesto was developed ... by a small group of artists, writers, filmmakers and media professionals who, while not particularly religious, felt a collective need to fight back against our increasingly fast-paced way of living. The idea is to take time off, deadlines and paperwork be damned. In the Manifesto, (they write) we’ve adapted our ancestors’ rituals by carving out one day per week to unwind, unplug, relax, reflect, get outdoors, get with loved ones. The ten principles are to be observed one day per week, from sunset to sunset. On their webpage (www.sabbathmanifesto.org) they write: We invite you to practice, challenge and/or help shape what we’re creating.

Here are the Sabbath Manifesto’s ten points:

- Avoid technology.
- Connect with loved ones.
- Nurture your health.
- Get outside.

- Avoid commerce.
- Light candles.
- Drink wine.
- Eat bread.
- Find silence.
- Give back.

How do you actually do it? I think the best way to start is to do sit down with your family or a group of friends and decide if you want to do this together. Talk about what each principle might mean. Get ten people and assign each one a principle to think through and come back to talk about with the group. When it comes to avoiding technology, can you go off email for 24 hours? The folks at Reboot actually developed cute little “sleeping bags” with the motto, avoid the distracting electronic glow and “put your cell to sleep for Shabbat.” What does it mean to “find silence” or “give back.” What guidelines might you use for “avoiding commerce” and why? Then come together for dinner at the end of Shabbat and talk about how this actually worked in people’s lives.

Now let me be clear, I am not saying that technology is evil. I’m saying, for many of us, it is out of hand. Let me share some of the reasons why I think disconnecting in order to re-connect is a good thing to do. First, and maybe foremost, focused attention is how you bring love into your life. You need to know how to concentrate if you hope to fall in love,

build a family, at some point, raise moderately sane children. Let me share a story; When I look back over time growing up, I often say how much I loved the times my dad and I went camping and fishing together. Those times stand out in my memory as incredibly special times between us. But when I think carefully, we actually didn't go that much. Once a year maybe. But what was powerful was that we spent focused, uninterrupted time together away from school and work and that had such a profound impact on me that I swore I would do the same thing with my children, which I did and still do. We intrinsically know when people are paying attention to us or not. And if I tell you that it's really all right, we can go out to coffee and have a great connection while I check my email, text under that table and answer a few calls, I am handing you bull and I should be ashamed of myself. Oh, we can have fun but it is essentially not the same quality of time as if we had turned off our gadgets before going out. Here's another recent example. I went to a great concert this week, powerful, fun live music, sitting close to the stage, and the woman sitting next to me was texting on her Blackberry throughout the whole concert. I don't know what her experience with the music was like and it's not up to me to decide how she spends her time but I'll make a value judgment and say you have a different experience of music, you hear and understand it in a different way, if your attention is fragmented. On another level, it was just rude. The musicians were playing their hearts out and she was right in front of them, in the third row, texting. At one point, the lead singer even said, "We can see that nice glow from your Blackberries on your faces..."

Here's a second reason why I think that the ability to disconnect in

order to reconnect is important in our lives and this is a spiritual observation. Ultimately our life is not happening on a screen and you won't find your life by looking there. To have a richer, fuller experience in our lives, we need to be present in the actual space we are occupying in the world. On Rosh Hashanah we read how as a child Isaac's brother Ishmael cries and God answers him "Ba'asher hu sham," in the place were he is. I think there is a lot to be learned from that short piece of Torah. "In the place where you are" That is where we find God, where we find meaning, where our questions are answered: by focusing and concentrating on the place we are now. You know, people are strange. We spend so much time worrying about what's going to happen next, we lose track of what's happening right now. We worry so much about what happened in the past, that we fail to see that it halaf v'halach, the past is already gone. We are everywhere but where we actually are—staring at a little screen, working on a big screen. Technology puts us in hundreds of places at any given moment and once in a while, it's good to know we can step away from all of those digital connections and simply be where we are now.

A nice Jewish boy, Richard Alpert, who became a Buddhist and changed his name to Baba Ram Dass distilled this meaning in a book that was popular in the 1970s with the title "Be Here Now." He wrote a lot about how to quiet our mind from the distractions of the industrial world but his message was similar. If we choose to lead a life where we are so scattered that we can never concentrate on what is actually happening around us, the sensations of our bodies and our breathing, to the natural world in which we exist, then we will never find peace. I think the

Shabbat Manifesto gives us an opportunity reassess how we can be more present in our own lives.

What is the most valuable thing in life? Money? It comes and goes. Possessions are just things. The most valuable thing in life is Time. It's the one thing you can never reclaim once you have lost it. Health is of major importance but you need time to enjoy good health. The problem with our over connected lives is that we have blurred the boundaries of all the time in our lives: personal time, family time, ordinary time, special times, work time; each area bleeds into the other. I know it's hard to believe, but when our kids were little, Gail and I didn't have cell phones. No one had cell phones. When we went out on a family adventure, to the woods, to a park, no one checked their email, texted with someone across the country. Email hadn't been invented. You hung out with your kids and tickled them and ran around with them and paid attention so they didn't break their arms on the monkey bars. If you went out with your best friend, it was just the two of you. There were also rules and that created some sacred spaces of time in your life. You didn't call someone at home after 9:30 or so and for that matter, you didn't call on a weekend for work unless it was an emergency. But now you can email them or text them or post new information 24/7. My faculty colleagues send out a flow of emails on Sunday morning and I'm thinking, "What happened to eating a bagel and reading the Sunday Times in peace and quiet without feeling guilty for not answering new work emails on a Sunday?" The flow of information never stops. I like a lot a lot of information and I'm not saying we should, or could, return to that time before connection became a part of our lives. But I am saying

that we have lost balance and the opportunity and pressure for constant connection has, for many people, become a burden rather than a blessing.

Let me review the Sabbath Manifesto's ten principles again:

- Avoid technology.
- Connect with loved ones.
- Nurture your health.
- Get outside.
- Avoid commerce.
- Light candles.
- Drink wine.
- Eat bread.
- Find silence.

When I was first exploring traditional Jewish practice, as a rabbinic student in Jerusalem, I remember hearing the famous quote in the gemarah, "If all the Jews in the world would observe the Shabbat two weeks in a row, that would bring the Messiah to the world." My initial reactions to this quote were not positive: First, I thought it was an Orthodox ploy to try to convince, to entice, liberal Jews to observe Shabbat in an Orthodox context. When I started exploring Shabbat myself and saw the joy and peace that it could bring, I understood this

statement in a very different way. It was indeed within our own power to fashion the world to come, right here on earth. If we could achieve such balance, peace and equilibrium in our lives, if we could be fully present, at one with ourselves and with the people we love, we wouldn't even have to wait for the messiah. The Messiah would already be here. Shabbat Shalom. Hatimah Tovah. May you be sealed for a blessing in the book of life.