



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Rosh Hashanah 1

Trump, Emoticons, And the Secret of Communication

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TRUMP, EMOTICONS, AND THE SECRET OF COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

Much critique has been directed toward the “new” dumbed-down communication of our time. Instead of meaningful, personal and intimate conversations, we have entered the age of the sound bite (or is it sound byte with a “y”), the short video clip, the instant message, the 140-character tweet, the meme. Instead of a sincere smile, we have... emoticons.

Many lament this form of communication as the downfall of civilization – even as they, ironically, use all these tools themselves. Many see it as rude and even demeaning, pointing to President Trump and his daily tweets. Our President, whether you like him or not, has apparently mastered and turned social media into an art form, or a weapon – depending who you ask. Many see it as negative, but others point out that he was elected due to his mastery of this medium.

Is there any upside to this new form of communicating?

In all things there is a lesson in serving G-d. How much more so in a global technology that is transforming the way we communicate with each other, and one that is impacting the presidency itself. As we stand on Rosh Hashanah, the day that the world is born, when the destiny of nations is determined, what lessons may we learn from tweets, emoticons and from the Year of the Trump?

Of all things, Rosh Hashanah is synonymous with *Simanim*, signs or omens. We eat pomegranates to remind us of our fullness with goodness; we eat honey for sweetness; we eat foods that multiply and grow quickly for growth and birth; we eat heads of fish and lambs for the head of the year; we don't eat sour or sharp foods so as not to have a sour or sharp year. This is based on a cryptic Talmud where Abaya says that now that we know that omens are a significant thing, at the head of the year one should eat a gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets, and dates.

A (humorous) take on the new world of instant texting, coupled with the Bnei Yissachar's fascinating explanation of this enigmatic Talmud relating Rosh Hashana customs to signs – akin to comparing communication through an emoticon versus communication through a sermon – shed a new light on the power of this New Year.

Rosh Hashanah is not a time for sermons, for words, but for higher sounds, deeper insights, and more primal symbols. A captured in a touching parable of the Baal Shem Tov.

When done right, short is long, and a brief gesture can change worlds.

1. Win-Dow of Opportunity

Communication is vastly different today than it ever was in the history of existence. I often imagine what it would be like a thousand years from now when the archeologists and anthropologists sift through the digs of today's 21st century civilization and discover emoticons, emojis, LOL and OMG text messages. How will they read and decipher this era?

There is an online viral video clip that demonstrates today's communication succinctly and humorously:

A family sits around the dinner table.¹ Father at on end, mother at the other, with the children along the table's length. All are sitting with perfect posture, eating diligently and respectfully. Every minute or so, the clumsy father knocks something down to the ground. First it's the napkin off his lap. When he bends to pick it up and his eyes are below the table, faster than the speed of light each family member, mother and children, grab their respective phones and text in rapid finger movements. Right before father lifts his head back up, they put their phones away.

When father clumsily knocks the saltshaker off the table, the wife and children once again grab their phones and text in a fast blur. And right before father's eyes return to the table, they hide their phones.

This happens again and again throughout dinner. As the meal is about to conclude, father knocks down the entire bread bowl. As father bends down to retrieve the slices and rolls, the camera zooms in. What you see captures today's reality:

Father bends down to pick up the bread. As soon as he is below table level, he whips out his phone to continue his rapid fire texting.

2. A New Form of Communication: Good or Bad?

Much critique has been directed toward the "new" dumbed-down communication of our time. Instead of meaningful, personal and intimate conversations, we have entered the age of the sound bite (or is it sound byte with a "y"), the short video clip, the instant message, the 140-character tweet, the meme. Instead of intelligent headlines we have SEO friendly key words. Instead of a sincere smile, we have... emoticons.

Many lament this form of communication as the downfall of civilization – even as they, ironically, use all these tools themselves. Many see it as rude and even demeaning, pointing to President Trump and his daily tweets. Our President, whether you like him or not, has apparently mastered and turned social media into an art form, or a weapon – depending who you ask. Many see it as negative, but others point out that he was elected due to his mastery of this medium.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hY_vzOjdaI4.

The downside of this abbreviated and instant form of communication is quite obvious: It lends itself to shallow and superficial relationships. It discourages true dialogue, with all its nuances and flexibility. It encourages impatience and insensitivity.

It lacks the sophistication and subtleties necessary to understand and address the issues and challenges we face – an understanding that comes only from comprehensive and through analysis. It can feed into our basest instincts and prejudices. Distilling everything into a single sound bite or image can amplify divisiveness and extremism.

And above all, it can depersonalize and dehumanize us. When was the last time you had a good ol' face to face, heart to heart, soul to soul conversation with a loved one, with a friend, with a colleague?

I recently met a classmate of mine who I haven't seen in years. We were both being driven to a mutual colleague's wedding. And I looked forward to the opportunity to catch up with him as we were in this car together for a two hour drive.

One problem though. From the moment we entered the car, my friend was on his mobile texting. I waited a while, thinking that he will finish his texting. I then began signaling to him that I would like to speak with him he waved me off with his hand, lifting his index finger, indicating soon, soon. But to no avail. He continued staring at his phone, texting, browsing, whatever. Finally, not wanting to be further ignored, I decided to... -- yes, you guessed it – I decided to... text him.

Looking at him at that moment, I could tell that he was a bit befuddled. He turns to me and asks me “are you texting me?” I said, “Yes.” “Why are you texting me when you are sitting right near me?” “Because I can't get your attention!...”

That's the downside to this new age of 24/6 instant messaging.

3. Is There an Upside to this New Form of Communication?

But is there any upside to this new and modern form of communicating?

Judaism teaches us that in all things there is a lesson in serving G-d. How much more so in a global technology that is transforming the way we communicate with each other, and one that is impacting the presidency itself.

As we stand on Rosh Hashanah, the day that the world is born, when the destiny of nations is determined, what lessons may we learn from tweets, instant messaging, emoticons, and from the Year of the Trump?

Let me be clear: This sermon is not about tweets nor about Trump. It is about Rosh Hashana. However, tweets and texts – today's ways of communicating – are a springboard that can illuminate for us the power

of Rosh Hashana. And as we shall see, Rosh Hashana can teach us a profound and relevant lesson about the unprecedented time in which we live, as Jews and the world at large, and about the art of true communication.

4. A Text Message

Let us revisit the way we communicate today. I want every one of you to take a moment to think of a text message or email you sent this week. Try to remember if you used an emoticon, and emoji, a smiley face, shorthand (like “luv u”), an abbreviation (like “prob” or “txt”), or an acronym (like OMG or LOL).

From the looks on your faces it seems as if you have.

We spoke about the downside of this form of communication. How it is lacking any depth and true articulation and iteration (never mind reiteration). And how it fuels the short attention span of a fast-food world.

But there is an upside in this brevity. The upside is that a short, well placed expression can communicate a primal idea in a very punchy and potent way – one that touches deep strings, much more than a lengthy dissertation.²

Some of our deepest feelings are expressed in simple ways – like the cry of a child, the outburst of joy, or the exclamation of “oy vey!” Certain expressions resonate deeply within us.

Today, for better or for worse (and this is neither an endorsement nor critique of Trump) – masters of this type of Twitter-slash-emoji way of articulating the world, have the power to sway millions of people today.

As a rabbi, whose bread and butter is teaching, communicating, sermonizing, this reality presents a unique challenge: how to communicate a message to a generation for whom G-d has been rendered into the middling “G” of OMG?

As a parent, this reality poses perhaps an even more difficult challenge: how to communicate with your children for whom love is the image of a heart and like is a thing you do to an Instagram or Facebook post?

How are friends meant to communicate in such an impersonal and detached reality? And how are we, rabbis, parents, teachers, meant to communicate essential and eternal truth to ourselves, our loved ones, our students, and our communities?

The answer, of course, lies in the Torah. And namely in Rosh Hashana.

² <https://newrepublic.com/article/118562/emoticons-effect-way-we-communicate-linguists-study-effects>.

5. Sign Language, Symbols, and Good Omens

The Talmud says something very cryptic about Rosh Hashanah:

Said Abaya: Now that you have said that an omen is a significant thing, a person should always be accustomed to see, at the beginning of the year, a gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates.³

What is the meaning of this enigmatic Talmud? Why indeed are omens significant? And why specifically these items? And why should we be accustomed to see these items on Rosh Hashana?

Rashi explains (and other commentaries elaborate in various ways) that some of these edibles are sweet and some grow very quickly, they are therefore omens portending quick prosperous growth and sweetness, indicative of a blessed new year that will, please G-d, see much quick growth and sweet happenings.

The Talmud continues with other customary Rosh Hashana omen food items, such as the head of a lamb, or fish. We also know there are customs to eat on Rosh Hashana carrots, sweet foods, honey and pomegranate. Each of these are omens and signs that promise to herald in a blessed year. Fish and carrots, for example, are both signs of birthing and increasing (fish multiply in large numbers. Carrots, whose Yiddish name, *meren*, means to multiply).

But this still begs explanation: Judaism in general rejects omens and premonitions. Why would we associate with omens, which seems superficial and superstitious, almost like divinations, which of course are prohibited in Judaism? So why is it a Jewish custom to eat items which identify with various omens? And why specifically on Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the year?

6. The Bnei Yissachar

The Bnei Yissachar⁴ has a fascinating take on this Talmud. Newborn children cannot speak, and therefore parents communicate with them through shiny objects, rattles, cooing sounds, faces, and other such seemingly primitive methods.

Conventionally we think that newborns cannot speak because they are underdeveloped, immature, and have not yet learned to articulate words. In reality however, true newborns cannot speak not because they are **underdeveloped** but rather because they are **overdeveloped**.

Speech is a limitation. It is confined to articulate a defined and limited piece of information, such as an idea, a sermon, a joke, a story. However, deeper and more intimate feelings that are inexpressible cannot be articulat-

³ Kritut 6a; Horayot 12a.

⁴ Vol. II, Tishrei, Maamar 2, ois 10.

ed in words of speech. Words are simply too limited to express more intense feelings. The only way to express them is in a mere cry or laugh, or just by making a sign or a motion. In times of great joy or sadness one cries or weeps, in times of overwhelming emotion one may at best just make a gesture.

Words are like containers with limited parameters. Therefore they can express only more tangible and limited experiences. More profound feelings which come from the deeper recesses of the soul can only be expressed in gestures or signs.

Newborn babies are always on such a level, untainted by the externals of communication – they express themselves in basic and primal coos and cries.

7. Rosh Hashanah – A Newborn Universe

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the world is born. *Hayom baras olam*. Birth is as primal and as raw as it gets. Rosh Hashana takes us back to our very birthing and the birthing of the universe. When everything was at its core and essential level. Newborn worlds cannot speak words, but rather communicate with signs, motions and omens.

It is therefore customary on Rosh Hashana, as the Talmud teaches, to eat certain foods, symbolic of growth, abundance, and blessing because these omens and signs convey the essence of sweetness and growth much better and deeper than words. An essence which is revealed on the birthday of the human race.

The Shofar is of the same realm: a primal cry of a ram's horn, the simplest of wind instruments.

The Baal Shem Tov offers a parable to explain the significance of the primal sound of the shofar, comparing it to the cry of a child -- the only child of the king who was lost and had forgotten his native language. No one was therefore able to recognize or identify who he was. In utter despair he began to cry out in a loud voice, and the King, who recognized the voice of his son, went out to him and brought him into the house, kissing him and hugging him. This is the blowing of the shofar, a cry from deep within, which elicits G-d's love for his child.⁵

The simple call and cry of the shofar is more powerful than any sermon or article. The sounds of the shofar reflect the primal and inherent sounds from the depths of the soul, souls that resonate within us, which are far stronger than the most sophisticated words.

Rosh Hashanah is not a time for speeches, but for touching our core being, thereby experiencing total renewal, a new birth.

⁵ Hemshech V'Kocha 5637 chapter 70.

8. Primal Communication

Perhaps this is one of the lessons learned from the new media form of brief communication – the positive side of tweeting and instant messaging, in this Year of the Trump (Trumpet?). When someone communicates unfiltered like a child, though on the face it may seem immature and primitive, it can touch people at a core level, tapping into their most basic loves and fears.

In this day and age, the age of the emoji, the text, the OMG and LOL, the world communicates much more like rattling newborns than articulate adults.

So though this can feed into our lowest common denominator, Rosh Hashana teaches us the need to harness the primal voice, and touch each other's soul.

Hey, if you could touch someone's soul with a smiley face 😊 – perhaps that's not such a bad thing.

The lesson for us, on this Rosh Hashanah, is to tap into our most inherent childlike qualities, allowing our inner spark, our inner child to cry and laugh, to grow and be sweetened, without worrying so much about the self-absorption and self-importance of being adults.

This idea, of inherent G-dly purity transcending articulate communication, is powerfully captured in a legendary Chassidic story.

9. Higher Communication (Story)

Once during the Yom Kippur Neilah prayer, the Baal Shem Tov cried and entreated more than usual. The disciples understood that there must be a serious prosecution in the heavenly court and the situation was grave. So they also intensified their prayers and tears. When the rest of the congregation saw this, their hearts were moved and they also joined the impassioned supplication.

Amidst the congregation there was a young farm boy, who had come for the Days of Awe to the Baal Shem Tov's synagogue. He was uneducated, and throughout the prayer he stood silently looking at the face of the cantor without uttering a word.

Though he was illiterate, there was an area in which he was very proficient. As a farm boy, he knew the sounds made by all the different farm animals, and especially the esteemed rooster's crow at dawn break. When he heard the weeping and the outcries of the congregation, he was so moved to the core that he spontaneously cried out loudly with pure sincerity, "Cock-a-doodle-do! G-d, have mercy!"

The worshippers in the synagogue were confused by this voice crowing like a rooster, and a few of them scolded him to quiet down, and would have thrown him out of the shul had he not protested, "I am also a Jew."

Everyone noticed that the Baal Shem Tov's face changed from a serious face to a glowing one as he commenced with the Neilah prayer.

As Yom Kippur ended, the Baal Shem Tov related to his disciples that there had been an accusation leveled in heaven, with the prosecution seeking to have the community sentenced to destruction.

As much as he prayed to invoke divine mercy on the community, he sensed that he would not prevail, and the community would be tragically destroyed.

However, suddenly the sound of the pure call of the farm boy was heard in heaven, and its sincerity pierced the very heavens asunder, bringing great pleasure above, nullifying all the prosecutions.⁶

10. Conclusion: Newborn Communication

We are faced with a unique challenge today:

Modern communication is undergoing radical changes. Our children communicate through emoticons, emojis, cryptic acronyms (OMG, LOL), confusing abbreviations (luv u), tweets, texts and Facebook pokes. Media too is compelled to follow suit. Everyone is affected by these new mediums and styles.

How then to communicate to our children? As people of the book, how do we get an eternal message across with an emoticon? As educators and teachers, how do we possibly convey truth in an acronym or abbreviation?

Rosh Hashana provides us with the answer:

The best way to battle the potential shallowness of instant and abbreviated messaging is not to resist it, but to harness and transform it into a force for good. To use it to express the core primal voice of our pure souls – the innocent and simple voice of our inner child.

This means that we need to get beyond pontificating, preaching, sermonizing, orating – to our children, to each other to ourselves. We need to speak words from the heart, which enter the heart. It's not our oratory skills that will reach another, but our kindness, our spirit, our caring.

Remember: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

When you see someone alone, go over and extend a warm hand, offer a kind gesture, say a caring word.

Like a flower, people need nurturing, watering, not words.

⁶ Igrot Kodesh Admor Maharayatz, vol. 4, p. 314.

Built into our modern system are emoticons, omens, signs and symbols that convey the nuclear nugget of the message without words but with items, logos, signs relatable to all – especially this post-com generation.

This has its potential downside. But Rosh Hashana teaches us to figure out how to channel it for the good.

Zeh HaYom Techilas Maasecho. Today is the beginning of your creation. Rosh Hashana, our collective birthday – and the primal call of the shofar – takes us back into the core of our beings, as we were at birth. It takes us back to our pre-language essence, to our base expression, before we began to articulate words.

Through the “omens” and “signs” of Rosh Hashanah – foods we eat, horns we blast, sweetness we dip, traditions we keep – we teach our children the most profound lessons in ways that words and essays never could, all without worrying about attention spans and character counts.

There is a primal calling within us that transcends communication. It is found in a sign, a food item, an omen.

When a Jew is told that he is full of righteous acts, Mitzvoth, it may go in one ear and out the other. But when a Jew is shown a pomegranate, and is told that he and every Jew is full of Mitzvoth like the seeds of a pomegranate, and then the Jew makes a blessing on that fruit, that physical object touches the Jew in ways mere words never could.

When a Jew eats foods that grow quickly, the Jew is inspired to constantly grow.

Words divide us. Different people speak different languages. Different communities may pray different versions of the Machzor.

But we all blow the same Shofar. We all eat the same honey. We all make the same Shechianu on the same pomegranate. On the primal level we all sound the same voice.

The world is born on this day. Let us channel our newborn child and communicate less with words and more with prime sounds, with unifying signs, with our primal souls and spirits.

When done right, short is long, and a brief gesture can change worlds.

Kesiva V'chasima Tova. A Happy and Sweet New Year!

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