



PASSOVER

Passover Day 7

Facebook, Privacy Policies and the Splitting of the Sea:
What to Reveal and What to Conceal?

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FACEBOOK, PRIVACY POLICIES AND THE SPLITTING OF THE SEA: WHAT TO REVEAL AND WHAT TO CONCEAL?

ABSTRACT

The revelation that Facebook allowed access to private personal data of some 50 millions user to Cambridge Analytica has sent shocks and tremors across the digital (and analogue) world.

Facebook stores trillions of data points on hundreds of millions of people, you (if you're one of two billion Facebook users) included.

So does Google, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, YouTube, and every other website and technology company worth its terabytes

Does not Amazon suggest uncannily accurate products? Does not Netflix know exactly what shows interest you? And what about when that spooky banner ad pops up for a product you recently searched?

And what about the over-sharing and overexposure of Instagram, Snapchat, Instachat, and Snapgram?

You know your privacy is non-existent when you have to acknowledge o-so-many perpetually updated privacy policies. If a company has a privacy policy, one that updates monthly, you know you've got a problem.

In this revolutionary technological age, wondrous in so many ways, is privacy a thing of the past?

Have secrets become fossilized? Is personal information a bygone?

On this seventh day of Passover, as we celebrate the splitting of the sea, when the hidden is revealed, what does the Torah say about privacy in an overexposed world, about personal space in an increasingly public domain?

1. Private Collection

On the exposed heels of Facebook's privacy policies – or lack thereof – a cartoon is circling the web in viral glee.

It depicts three characters. The first is an obvious Facebook addict. The second is a Facebook executive. The third is an online advertiser.

The addicted Facebook user says: "I'm glad Facebook's taking privacy issues seriously..."

The Facebook executive is whispering to the ad executive, obviously about the addicted Facebook user: “Atheist, married, 75k annually, drinker, minivan owner, t-shirt collector, overweight, lonely, insecure...”

2. Privacy in Public; Publicity in Private

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Does not Amazon suggest uncannily accurate products? Does not Netflix know exactly what shows interest you? And what about when that spooky banner ad pops up for a product you recently searched?

Having a privacy policy is like having human resources department: you only need HR if there is a problem with how you treat your humans. A healthy person does not require an HR department to run his or her private human resources, because they are naturally in sync. When a company grows, its workforce becomes more diverse, and a plethora of often dissent opinions and interests are represented. Then, HR is required to hire and fire, facilitate and maximize the company's human assets.

The same is true with privacy. A healthy individual doesn't really require a privacy policy – he or she knows what should be private and what public. But when platforms are created whose very existences are built on exploiting personal information, and making the private public and broadcasting the inward outward, a privacy policy is required to maintain trust, safety, and quality control.

Bolstered by honest and excellent privacy policies, the platforms could help connect people, build unity and community, and make the world a brighter place. With weak and exploitive privacy policies, these platforms could be dangerous and destructive.

The Internet in general struggles with this question. Facebook, Google, Apple, Amazon, and every other tech company struggle with this each in their own unique way. How to balance the power of data and information mining with privacy and trustworthiness?

This question is increasingly becom

ing the question. As technology advances, and becomes more and more ubiquitous, more and more invasive, we are challenged with the question: how to integrate while maintaining privacy, how to keep yourself pure

and innocent – *kedosh*, holy, as in removed and consecrated – while also capitalizing on the vast possibilities of tech for good?

3. Full Disclosure, Full Exposure

Most important things in life are quiet, unheard, unseen, unceremonious. If someone asks you “What does it feel like to be healthy?” you would respond: “Health doesn’t feel like anything.” It is seamless and sensationless. If you felt yourself breathe – or felt your heartbeat or any other sensation in your body – you know that there is a problem. Life itself is alive and, when running smoothly, doesn’t sound like anything. It is quite difficult to explain as well. Like a machine that runs well, a well-running life does not rumble, sputter, or make much noise.

Only when, heaven forefend, a problem arises does a machine, or life, begin to make sounds, to the point of unnatural and disturbing noises.

Generally speaking, the closer one is to the core of something the less it reveals and expresses. Superficial things are easy to define and quantify. Essential things defy expression. They are very difficult, if not impossible, to broadcast and articulate.

The weather, the news, sports, movies, game shows are all easy things to speak about. Soul, G-d, spirit, love, family are all quite difficult to express, explain and share.

Revealing the concealed, expressing the inexpressible, requires an extraordinary power. The laws of nature usually conceal the forces that lie beneath the surface. That is why nature in Hebrew is called *teva*, from the word *tovu b’yam suf*, submerged in the sea, because like the sea, nature conceals all that lies within.

When we see the sun rise in the morning we dismiss it as a “natural event.” When we breathe – inhaling and exhaling approximately eighteen times a minute – we don’t even notice it. Why? Because it happens all the time, and we chalk it up to being just the way nature works.

But when we witness a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, or we visit someone who is struggling to breathe, G-d forbid, we suddenly realize the miracle of a sunrise, the miracle of every breath.

Without effort we humans gravitate to looking at the surface of things. It takes a special focus and pause to see the forest for the trees, to stop and smell the roses – to uncover what is concealed “beneath the hood”.

Is life natural or miraculous? Without giving it much thought most people may answer that life is very natural. But when you think about it, even for a moment, we realize that life is miraculous. Think about all the pieces that have to work in perfect sync even to take one breath! Or to ingest a piece of food!

When you consider the fact that the human body has over 32 trillion cells – yes, trillion (the only number greater than the US deficit...) – it's simply mind-boggling to think what type miracle – actually over 30 trillion miracles – is necessary to ensure that all these cells work in harmony. Even one mutant cell, G-d forbid, can create havoc. What are the odds of a healthy child being born.

Life is indeed a miracle. But to recognize that we need to look beneath the superficial surface of existence and uncover the secrets that lay embedded within and beneath the cover.

That's why most revelations on Facebook or Instagram are underwhelming at best, perverse at worst – they reveal the superficial, they expose the exposed. Its revelations aren't miraculous, uncovering the soul of things; rather, they are more voyeuristic, showing things no one should be looking at in the first place.

4. The Split Heard Around The World

By contrast, this very day, the seventh day of Passover, reminds us to uncover the true secrets of life. The true miracles that lay beneath the surface of our lives.

Today, 3330 years ago, seven days after the Jewish people left Egypt, the sea split before them – and that split was heard around the world.

Kriat Yam Suf, the splitting of the sea, was a miraculous, wondrous revelation of essence that went viral. It was not a silent event witnessed by a select few. It was true core divinity revealed via “mass media” of the time for all to see.

Usually superficial things like cat videos and pop songs are heard around the world, going viral and accumulating billions of views and millions of likes. But, in this case, a divine act went viral, from one end of the world to the other.

The parting of the sea was witnessed by all the Jews, as well as by the Egyptian army with Pharaoh at their head.

But there was more. We read in the Torah:

Now Moses' father in law, Jethro, the chieftain of Midian, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel, His people that the Lord had taken Israel out of Egypt.¹

This is the opening verse of the portion of Yitro in the Book of Exodus. What did Jethro/Yitro hear that inspired him so and how did he hear it?

¹ Exodus 18:1; cf. Zevachim 116a.

The Midrash Mechilta² documents a number of opinions what exactly Yitro heard. One of them was that Yitro heard about the great and wondrous miracle of the splitting of the sea. This was before the era of tweets and social media, even before postal services and telegrams. Yitro lived in Midian, which is on the other side of the Sinai desert. How did Yitro hear about the splitting of the sea?

The Midrash quotes Rabbi Eliezer who teaches that when the sea parted the entire world, from one end of the earth to the other, heard it splitting. And there are scriptural proofs: *And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites, who were on the side of the Jordan westward, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan from before the children of Israel until they had passed over, that their heart melted, nor was there spirit in them anymore, because of the children of Israel.*³

This verse speaks of the splitting of the Jordan River which happened when the Jewish people entered Israel, forty years after the splitting of the Red Sea. However, when Joshua sent two spies before conquering Israel, Rahab, told them:

*For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt... And as soon as we heard, our hearts melted, nor did there remain anymore spirit in any man because of you, for the Lord your G-d He is G-d in heaven above and on the earth below.*⁴

Just as all of the kings and kingdoms heard the Jordan split as they entered Israel, so too did they hear when the Red Sea split after leaving Egypt.

This is what Yitro heard, even though he was in a different country.

But how did the news reach him? How did it reach the entire world? Today, even with so many advanced technologies at our disposal, it still remains difficult to reach the entire world. Without technology, how did the news of the splitting of the sea reverberate across the globe?

5. Message vs. Media

Konrad Lorenz, a Nobel Prize winning zoologist and ethologist, once said: “Philosophers are people who know less and less about more and more, until they know nothing about everything. Scientists are people who know more and more about less and less, until they know everything about nothing.”

This is similar to the maxim about today’s state of literacy: “Today, people read more and more about less and less.”

² Ad loc.

³ Joshua 5:1.

⁴ Joshua 2:10-11.

Today, a message could carry across the world, reach billions of eyeballs, not because of the message per se, but because of the media and its vast power. Indeed, today a message could carry across the world only because of the media and despite the message itself.

A cat video or music video could have billions of views despite the fact that the content is absolutely meaningless and fleeting. The media, the tools, the platforms are so powerful that the actual content (or lack thereof) is almost irrelevant.

Because of the power of technology itself, a meme of immense insignificance could become the hottest thing and coolest fad – despite the fact that it truly contributes zilch to humanity.

Anything, literally anything, could potentially reach 7 billion people instantaneously. Indeed, from the popularity of today's content, it seems that the less meaningful the more viral.

This was not the case 30 years ago – never mind 3330 years ago. Then, the only way for a message to be heard around the world, is for the message to be valuable, relevant and profound enough to affect and resonate across the entire world.

Today, the message is the medium. Meaningful content does not matter that much. The media allows a message to reverberate from one end of the world to another.

But back then, the message had to be powerful enough on its own to make it across the globe.

Most messages are not that powerful. Most things – like your cat dancing or what you ate for breakfast – simply do not have that mass appeal.

It took the parting of the sea – a truly wondrous and miraculous event – to ripple virally across the world.

It took G-d's revelation; it took the public reveal of the private mystery of existence. It took the splitting of the sea.

6. Privacy Publicized; Publicity Privatized

What happened at the splitting of the sea? The hidden was revealed, and the revealed was hidden.

Sea and land represent two states of consciousness: Land reflects the surface level of existence. That which is exposed to the naked eye. Sea, whose waters conceal all life submerged within it, manifests the inner forces at work behind the scenes of existence. Think of it like the difference between the conscious (land) and the supra (or sub-)conscious (water).

The mystics identify land as the “revealed worlds” (*alma d’isgalya*), and water as the “hidden worlds” (*alma d’iskasya*).

We each have these two land and sea dimensions within us: Your body is like “land.” Your soul is the like the “sea.”

When the sea parted 3330 years ago today, the underwater world of the sea, which is hidden to the naked eye, was split open and exposed for the entire world to see (see the sea). And the true divine essence and soul of existence and the earth, which represents the surface level, was revealed.

The concealed secret, inner layers of existence were brought to the surface and the exposed surface levels of matter were subsumed in the depths of true existence. G-dliness became concrete and empirical, while the material world became abstract and ethereal. Spirit became reality and matter became theoretical. During the splitting of the sea, theoretical physics was exactly that.

Usually the soul is hidden within the body. Like a hand concealed in a glove. When the sea parted – and was transformed to land⁵ – the soul was revealed. The invisible hand inside the glove was revealed.

Such an otherworldly and unprecedented experience clearly had a dramatic impact, which blasted across the world. How could such an earth shattering event not be heard and felt from one end of the earth to the other? The sheer magnitude of the event did not require media, email, twitter, and even... Facebook, to reach the world.

Today, the situation is exactly opposite. In our superficial world which worships the “glove” instead of the “hand,” the “sizzle” more than the “steak,” the “form” rather than the “function,” the “body” in place of the “soul” (you get the idea) – the medium trumps the message. Because of mass and social media, a monumental event comes and goes with little fanfare and less staying power, and a tiny insignificant and inconsequential event can be blown up way out of proportion.

Today, an Instagram celebrity’s lunch could make more noise (though resonate less resonance) than a truly remarkable thought – only because media allows for this distortion.

Which leads us to Facebook, privacy, all e-communications, instant messaging, media, and the lesson for us today.

5 Psalms 66:6.

7. Conclusion: Every Post Should Reveal A Deeper Message

As we celebrate the 7th day of Passover, we have been blessed with the gift of *Kriat Yam Suf* – allowing us to see beneath and beyond “fake news” and “surface-level” stories

Today we are given the power to split open the sea, and turn the sea into land – to see the hidden forces within, while the concealing the surface. Of revealing G-d as reality and secreting matter as theoretical – what the Chasidic masters call *Elokus b'pshtus* and *olamos b'hisbadshus*. The divine is reality and outer existence is the novelty.

Every person has a right to privacy. Social media today is built on a business model which mines and exploits personal data for its own profit. We all can agree that this is inappropriate.

Yet, everything offers us a lesson in life. Today's technology and social media teaches us (and perhaps this is the deeper reason for its existence, for all that G-d created in this world was created for His honor⁶) that we have the power to reveal – not people's personal and confidential information, but – the concealed divine soul within our material world.

Perhaps we can create a spiritual social media revolution, by harnessing today's social media to quite literally achieve what the splitting of the sea accomplished 3330 years ago: Instead of profiting from people's private data, let us use social media to help us reveal and transmit the hidden underwater dimension to the broader world, and expose the superficial surface of life as being just that.

How do we accomplish this? It depends on you and I. If we wish, we have control over our lives. And we can ensure that our privacy is never undermined.

If you are using any social media or technology; if you email, text, WhatsApp, tweet, Facebook, YouTube, Instanapchatgrambook, if you do anything online – the next time you go online, before you do anything, ask yourself one simple question:

“Will the message I'm about to post or share reveal an inner dimension of the world?”

Before you text, post, upload, download, livestream, skype, facetime, whatever... ask yourself: Will my message or comment be soulful? Will it be like the splitting of the sea, uncovering a deeper truth and covering a façade?

The 7th day of Passover teaches us to reclaim our souls and their dominance over our bodies. To reclaim the purpose of our existence instead of just existing. To embrace spirit over matter. To realize and recognize that it is our

⁶ Avot end of chapter 6.

inner life (the waters of the sea) that should be driving our outer lives (land), rather than the other way around. The hand should be guiding the glove, not vice versa.

When we use our technologies and social media platforms in this manner we are also revealing their inner purpose: not to be forces in which the medium drives the message, where data mining and profiteering is more important than human souls, but the exact opposite: These mediums are just tools and instruments to bring about a spiritual revolution.

And now just as then, 3300 years ago today: when each of us and the entire world transmits this soulful message over our smart phones, tablets, laptops and desktops, we will ultimately create a ripple effect which will ripple through all of existence.

And lead us to the ultimate broadcast: That “just as in days when they left Egypt [so too now] I will show you wonders,”⁷ in the ultimate redemption, when “the earth (land) will be filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”⁸

Happy Passover and Chag Kosher v'Sameach!

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7 Micha 7:15

8 Isaiah 11:9 (tomorrow's Haftorah).