

Rosh HaShanah 5783 - The Paradox of Communication
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A number of years ago, Apple came out with a commercial to sell its watch. It advertised that, among other things, it could track sleep, check your heart rate, send you various notifications, and **even** make phone calls for you. At the end of the commercial, the narrator said, oh yeah, it can also tell time.

Now I know I'm in the target demographic for this commercial because most of my friends have smart watches. In some ways, they're cool. It's nice to know how many steps we've walked a day. My friends like seeing their text messages without having to fish into their pockets or purses for their phone. They like talking into their watch like a walkie talkie. And hey - sometimes we need the reminder when we might need to take a deep breath.

I used to have an Apple Watch - a fit bit too - but I gave them up. Why? Honestly, I thought the thing was bullying me. It told me when it thought I wasn't walking enough. When I thought I was having a perfectly productive day working on my rabbinic thesis, it made me feel bad that I wasn't exercising or standing up every hour. I also had a hard time feeling present in physical conversations when my watch would buzz and buzz and buzz.

This might come as a surprise to you but I am a millennial. The Pew Foundation defines the millennial generation as those being born between 1981 and 1996. I'll let you do the math on that, if you want. As a millennial, I was old enough to remember where I was on 9/11, and

understand the historical significance of this American tragedy. I was also born into a technological world. I remember the squeak of AOL, but not a world without the internet. I was heavily influenced by Steve Jobs and his presentations of the iPod, the iPad, the iPhone, where he would tell us that Apple fixed problems that we did not know we had. Thomas Friedman taught us that our world was shrinking minute by minute. These devices help our world to shrink because suddenly a watch is first a means of communication, and time-telling device is the fourteenth thing that it does.

Many refer to people of my generation and younger as digital natives, because we are not only able to, but eager to adapt as the technology changes. Forbes Magazine says that my generation has placed such a priority on the internet and cellphone, that we cannot imagine a world without these devices.¹ And they're right.

While this is true for me, I know it's probably true for you too. And that's OK. In fact, I think that was the purpose of creating a smart phone. It makes our life easier. It puts the internet at our fingertips. We can check the score of the ballgame, stay informed on current events, and keep in touch with everyone in our lives- at all hours of the day, regardless of where they are in the world. Technology, by its very definition, is the application of science for practical purposes. Thanks to technology, when I lived in Israel in 2016, calling my parents in California was exactly the same as calling my classmates down the street.

¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/margueritacheng/2019/06/19/8-characteristics-of-millennials-that-support-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/?sh=357b276829b7>

From the time when a cell phone was used only for emergencies because it cost a dollar a minute, until now, the pendulum has swung. Just from my phone, I can send a text-based message on at least four different apps on my phone. If I want to see people, there are others apps for that.

Why is this important? Communication has taken a different and more significant role in our lives. And when we communicate well, we feel more connected with others. In fact, Dr. Ron Wolfson describes personal communication as, “sharing the stories of your life as the essential bridge between two people and the connecting roadway of relationships”.² Wolfson describes the development of relationships in terms of how much we share about ourselves to others. At first, we engage in “small talk,” where we talk about impersonal things like the weather and traffic. Over time, as trust builds, we might reveal where we are from, what we do, and the basics of who we are. Eventually, if the relationship deepens, we grow more comfortable sharing what’s in (here), in our hearts and souls.³

With more ways to communicate than ever before, we should be able to enjoy deeper conversations with more people in our lives. It should be easier to communicate, and easier to build relationships. But we all know that this is not the case. **Somehow, we find ourselves within a paradox. Today there are more ways to communicate, and yet, we suffer from more**

²Ron Wolfson. *Relational Judaism*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013. 41.

³ Ibid.

miscommunications than ever before. So often, miscommunication begins with the technology we choose. We are too busy thinking about what we want to say and how we want to say it, that we do not consider what will be the experience of the person we're trying to reach.

Over time, these sorts of miscommunications impact our ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships. When this happens, we risk focusing on our own individual journeys.

But our world was not meant to be lived independently. If we continue to miscommunicate, our families, our society, and our world will fall apart because the foundation of our world was built on relationships. Generations ago, when we entered the nuclear age, a hotline was established between the United States and Russia so a miscommunication did not accidentally result in nuclear holocaust. Here, miscommunication could literally destroy the planet.

Miscommunication is not a little thing. How many families have been destroyed by a miscommunication that could not be resolved? How many arguments begin with a message that was lost in text? **In 5783, we need to learn why we are miscommunicating, and figure out how we can improve in the year to come.**

In 2016, four women who teach at top universities around the world, two at Oxford, one at Stanford, and the other at Lancaster University, began this work when they realized that their incoming students spoke in dramatically different ways than previous classes. They decided to do a deep dive into Gen Z, interviewing hundreds of students born between 1997 and 2012 to find out who these kids really were. What was especially interesting to me about this study was the emphasis they placed on learning the language that the students were using.

For Gen Z, their language begins in text form, and they text differently than we do. For example - if you agree with someone, you might text “OK”! Like with an O and a K. Maybe you capitalize the O, and then maybe the K, maybe not. You might even add an exclamation point. But for Gen Z - these are all different kinds of “OK’s”. There’s the two letter - OK. There’s the formal four letter Okay. There’s KK, and just K, but never KKK.

If the response was spelled with the letter k and a period, Gen Z perceives curtness. Why? First, the letter is lowercase, which indicates that the sender took time to “undo” the automatic capitalization. Second, when there is punctuation, Gen Z reads that as aggressive. A quick kk is more casual, understood to have a softer intonation than a single letter k. Gen Zers interpret all of this from our texts, even though we probably did not give as much thought to a letter or two as they did.

Different generations communicating differently is nothing new. How many of you ever told your parents - you guys just don’t get it- it’s slang. And how many of you as parents told your kids- you guys don’t get it- it was the slang we used. Someone from the Baby Boomer generation might use the word “groovy” to describe the same thing that a Gen Zer would describe as “fire”. The reality, is that different generations of people use different words to describe the same experiences. They are saying the same thing, but might need a translator to understand each another.

It reminds me of two people who go on a really excellent first date after which, one person waits by the phone. A few days later when the phone rings they wonder, why did it take so long? But perhaps, the person calling thought that it was more respectful to wait three days before asking for a second date. The two parties felt the same, but had different ways of expressing themselves. For some, this has the potential of being a relationship altering miscommunication. **We miss the mark when we presume that our communication style and needs are the same as the person with whom we are communicating.**

We can learn a lot about how we communicate with each other, by looking at how God communicates with us. In the Torah, most of the time, God communicates with the Israelites through Moses as an intermediary. But at Mount Sinai, God wanted to communicate with all of us directly.

This was a new form of communication between the Israelites and God. As the 10 Commandments were given, God spoke to the Israelites using all of their senses. They witnessed thunder and lightning, they smelled the smoke of the smoldering mountain. And they heard the sound of God's voice. In the midst of it all, they heard the sound of the shofar, growing louder and louder. The Israelites were closer to God than ever before. It was like they spoke each other's language. And after this intense moment of revelation, the Israelites begged for Moses to make it stop because it was too hard and too intense.

But then, the Israelites didn't hear anything from God for forty days. It was like going from an excellent first date to radio silence. You can imagine the Israelites asking each other, "What's going on?" "Is God ghosting us?"

See, following the moment of revelation, God continues giving Moses more than 50 commandments for the Israelites to follow. God reverted to only communicating with Moses, but the Israelites had no way of knowing this. The Israelites did not know how to understand God's silence. They could not see Moses, and they were left waiting by the phone. They assumed that God and Moses had abandoned them. As a result of this miscommunication, the Israelites begged Aaron to make them a god they could see and touch.

After the creation of the Golden Calf, God threatens to destroy the Israelites. God couldn't understand why the Israelites would commit such a horrible sin. But because Moses knew how to communicate with God, and because he knew how to communicate with his people, Moses was able to heal this fracture and restore the covenant.

We are not always good at noticing when our message is being misunderstood. In our day and age, we are often more interested in talking, than listening. When someone else is speaking, rather than listening carefully to what they're saying, we're thinking what we want to say in response. We might choose to send a text instead of picking up the phone because it is faster, or, if we're being honest, because we aren't really sure that we want to talk to that person.

There are more miscommunications when we are selfish, when we are only thinking of ourselves, and not about the person with whom we are trying to connect.

Communication only works when we develop sensitivity and understanding for the recipient of our message. God and Moses remembered that the Israelites had come from a society where they could see and touch their gods. God realized that the debacle of the Golden Calf was not a rejection of God's covenant, but rather a cry for help. So the Holy One found another way to communicate by providing a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This reminded the Israelites that God was always with them. And for later generations, God asked us to build a tabernacle, a physical place where we could come to communicate with the Divine.

In a world that is so divided it is vital that we learn how to communicate better with each other. We need to learn how to heal the fractures that separate us. We need to learn how to listen more carefully to what others are really trying to say. And we need to learn to be more sensitive so that what we share with others can be truly heard and understood. This is true for our families, when miscommunication can tear us apart. This is true for our country when miscommunication can have catastrophic consequences. And this is true for our world, where we speak in so many different languages that we lose the ability to understand each other's hearts.

There is a Midrash that after the situation with the Golden Calf, Moses went back up to Mount Sinai to heal the people's rupture with God. Before Moses ascended, the Israelites blew the

shofar, as a way of demonstrating their communal repentance.⁴ Through the shofar, the Israelites communicated with God, using the same technology that God had used to call them to revelation. The Israelites sounded the shofar to announce their recommitment to the covenant at Sinai, and to declare their repentance using God's unique language.

As we sound the shofar to announce the beginning of a New Year, let it call us to listen with more sensitivity as we strive to come together, using communication to strengthen our relationships to each other, our community, and the world at large.

Please turn to page 283 as we prepare to hear the call of the shofar that transcends language and speaks to us in a voice we can all understand.

⁴ Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 46