Rosh Hashanah Morning 2: ***Panim el Panim***, rethinking social media.

Sim Lev, ***pay attention.*** What were you doing in 2011? What was your life like 11 years ago? Do you remember the major event that changed humanity forever that year?... It wasn't a war, it wasn't an economic depression, it wasn't a pandemic: it was the year that iPhones (smartphones in general) became widely available. Especially here in America. Can you believe that it was just over a decade ago that our world changed forever?

A few weeks ago I read an amazing (and terrifying) statistic. In the sixties, a study was conducted in the United States, and one of the questions asked was the following: "Would you be upset if your children married someone of another race?". More than fifty percent of the people answered yes, this would affect them. The same question was asked in a similar study just a couple of years ago. Only 10% of people answered affirmatively, 90% of people said that they wouldn't care! What an amazing change in just over 60 years! Discrimination related to the color of someone's skin dropped dramatically! Still, surely there is much work to do, but this is a very good statistic about ourselves as a society and the progress we have made.

But... and there is always a but. In the sixties, people were also asked whether they would care if their children married someone of different ideological political backgrounds. Less than 10% answered that they would care. Today more than 60% said that they would be upset if their children married someone from a different political ideology. What an amazing (and terrifying) statistic. If discrimination due to the color of the skin dropped dramatically, the level of ideological radicalization, impossibility to understand, divide, and social tension increased exponentially.

Why? How can you explain this and many other very troubling statistics? Let me share just one more story: since 2011 the level of anxiety, depression and even suicide attempts among teenagers skyrocketed by over 30%! Many researchers found one simple explanation: social media and smartphones. These platforms, the physical phone that became an extra organ of our body, and the social media - the new arenas where our lives revolve around - are the sole (or main) responsible for some of the most challenging psychological and sociological struggles that we are facing as a society. The blessing became the curse.

I have been reading in the last couple of weeks an amazing book by the Israeli contemporary thinker Micah Goodman. This book seeks to explain how the blessing of social media - the internet together with smartphones - became a curse for our society and how we may be able to fix it. Because if the Jewish tradition teaches us something, especially in these days of Yamim Noraim (High Holidays), that teaching is what Rebbe Nachman of Braslav used to say: *"If you believe something could be broken you also have to believe that it could be fixed"*. We are in the age of social media, but we are in the days of Teshuvah. According to the Talmud a metaphor about Teshuvah is like a glass that could be broken but then rebuilt again into a new mold. But before talking about how to do the Tikun (reparation) we need to understand the level of Shevirah (brokenness) that social media brought to our lives.

Let's talk about the problems:

- **FOMO (Fear of missing out)**: always thinking that you are missing something somewhere else doesn't allow you to be "at the present moment" with the people surrounding you.
- **Filter bubbles-Confirmation bias:** We think that we are open-minded because we look at the internet as an open book, but the truth is that the algorithms only echo your own voice, your own political and ideological perspective.
- **Drop of empathy**: studies show that in order to be empathetic you need to be "face to face," to hear their voice, to see the movements in their hands and eyes. In the last 20 years, studies have shown that the level of empathy dropped 40% in youth. You need to be physically close to the other person in order to feel and experience empathy.
- **Depression**: the word "friend" loses meaning when you have more than 1000 "friends" on Facebook, but when you are going through a difficult moment or, just the opposite, when you receive some good news you are not sure whom to call or pay a visit to share your feelings.
- **Being bored**: Social media, apps and the internet do not allow us to be "bored", worsening problems even more: we forget how to be bored, how to be alone... we can't stand silence, we can´t stand solitude. It is "Forbidden to be bored".
- **Drop in level of attention/concentration**: We just can't wait for things to happen.. We just can no longer read a whole paper/book . Everything needs to take place now; simple and quick. Sharing a short tweet is easy, but understanding the depth of an idea or an analysis becomes "mission impossible".
- **Envy**: "Facebook envy". It even has a name. This has always been a problem, but social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook simply magnify the the problem. And envy is not only about what other people have, do or show. It is also about the existing gap between the "online you" and the "real you". We don't only compare ourselves to others, but we also start comparing our real lives with what we post, and that causes more depression.
- **Loss of privacy**: now everything could be heard, everything could be seen. Any conversation could be recorded, anything that I do could be filmed. Privacya vital value- is lost.
- **Fake news:** lies spread more easily than truth. Telling the truth requires relying on data, which sometimes could be boring. Lies are far more creative and are not bound to real life so, via our imagination, we can invent the most interesting and compelling stories.

Do you want me to continue? I'm sure you have already heard most of this. Me too. But reading them all together, spelling them out one after the other makes us think twice before grabbing our phones the next time. We think we have control over our phones but, in reality, they dominate us. How do we know? We grab the cell phone for one moment to check something on Instagram. Without realizing more than 20 minutes have elapsed and you continue to scroll down for more stories on Instagram, Tik-Tok, Facebook... and it is not you. It is the system. These platforms are created to catch our attention and to be almost impossible to just be turned off. Just think for one second about that "beep", that sound of your cellphone when you receive a notification. Alon Idan, an Israeli journalist, wrote: *"What does this sound have*

that is so special? Why are we so tempted to respond to that sound? Because it is the sound of potential. The sound of an infinity of possibilities."

According to the Israeli author and thinker, Micah Goodman, the two greatest challenges of our generation are in the political arena and the psychological ground. Social media and smartphones are to blame (in great part) for this.

I´m not ignoring the good side of smartphones, social media, and the internet. We can all appreciate that we can be more connected than ever in history with old friends and family members living in other parts of the world. We can all appreciate how fast we can fundraise when someone shares a terrible story on Facebook. We can all appreciate how easy it is to research something nowadays with Google and Wikipedia. We can all appreciate these and many other pros. But as Jews, we are built not only to see the good but also to think about the "curse inside the blessings" and try to find a cure, a solution.

But this is the catch... I´m not here to present any global and definite solution about how to deal with the problems that social media brought to us. I´m not an expert, and I don´t think even the experts have found a solution to this problem. For sure the answer is not going back to a world without smartphones, without social media, without the internet... They are here to stay. Like Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel said: "The faith of a jew is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above this world; not to reject but to surpass civilization" (Shabbat p. 27). We are just in the middle of the storm, there will be a solution, but we are still struggling to find one.

I want to talk to you about how from our own Jewish traditions and practices we can help ourselves and our communities, at least in small proportions, to deal with the struggles we are experiencing. Two basic Jewish traditions could help us to deal with the political divide and the psychological challenges we are facing. These are Shabbat & Talmud Torah.

Shabbat:

The most beautiful day of the week, the most joyful day of our weekly calendar. Shabbat is a day to disconnect. Shabbat is a day to re-find and re-discover our balance. What would we feel if during 24 hours we put away our phones? If at the beginning we can't do it for a whole day, what if we would just leave our phones at home, or turn them off, for a couple of hours when we go to the synagogue or when we have dinner around the table with our families? Shabbat may be an ancient key to forcing ourselves to disconnect from social media and the internet for a few hours. What would happen if instead of listening to songs on Spotify, we sang with friends or family? What would happen if instead of going to Wikipedia for information we opened a book? What would happen if instead of gossiping or uploading pictures on Facebook we sat around a table with friends and family and just talked about our lives? What if? Shabbat is the voice of our tradition that invites us to go back to "basics"; to recover face to face conversations, gatherings at a house, a park or a synagogue.

Talmud Torah:

And finally: the world needs more Talmud pages than Facebook pages. Maybe the most important contribution of the Jewish people to humanity was Shabbat (later on our "weekends") together with the notion that study is a sacred deed. In our Jewish fate, we don't study because there is an exam, we do it because we understand that it is the way to understand the will of God. In Judaism, studying is a sacred duty. And above the study of Torah, during the last 2000 years, the study of Talmud occupied the central piece of learning in the traditional Jewish world. And we can learn a lot from the Talmud to overcome the political divide that we are living as a society. On a Facebook page, you only hear your voice and the voice of people that think like you. And when another voice comes into play, it is usually the aggression of someone that disagrees with you, and their only contribution are insults or "copy-paste ideas". The facebook page just echoes your voice. It is you talking to the mirror.

The Talmud page is different. In every single page of the Talmud you find a position and a counter-position. A rabbi saying X and a rabbi saying Y. Both of them not aggravating each other but sharing reasoning, verses from the Torah to support their case, and arguments from other authorities. In every single page of the Talmud you don't usually see agreements, but you see arguments.

If Facebook pages are like mirrors, the Talmudic pages are like a window. You can see the value of the different rabbis standing on each side of the window. Maybe one position will finally overrule the opposite one but, but both of them are there for you to see. Stydying Talmud Torah, Torah, or simply studying any subject in a Jewish "Torah-like-fashion" will enable us to be more open, to deeper analyze complex issues, to hear the arguments of the other party, to think about alternatives, not to see the world in "black and white", but to see its shades of grays.

The Shabbat is the key to helping us overcome the psychological brake, and Talmud Torah is the path to overcome the political divide. Maybe not for an entire nation, and maybe not even for a whole city but maybe just for us as individuals, as families. Shabbat and Talmud Torah are intimately connected; both deeply need each other. It almost is a physical connection.. Just like us. We need a Kehilah, a congregation to celebrate Shabbat, and we need a Chevrutah, a partner, to study Torah. If our cell phones regularly alienate us, the Shabbat and Talmud Torah could bring us once again back together.

We need to start seeing each other more "Panim el Panim", face to face. The only way to cure our world, our society, is when we turn off- at least for a while- all the ecosystem we created around our cellphones, computers, social media, and the internet and we go back to the world of our parents and grandparents. Social media and the internet is a blessing. Let us be wise enough not to transform a blessing into a curse. And, to achieve that, we need once again, especially after the pandemic of Covid19, to make every effort possible to meet face to face. This is the only way to truly connect with someone. When you eat together, when you sing together, when you discuss together. So much is lost in translation with every post we upload in social media and so much is gained when we can explain our arguments face to face.

Moses, we are Told in the Bible, was the greatest prophet of all the prophets. Why? Because he communicated with God "panim el panim", "face to face" (Ex. 33:11). Because he talked to God "Pe el Pe" (12:8). Every time we have a screen in the middle there will be something broken in the conversation. This is my invitation this final morning of Rosh Hashanah: to do simple but meaningful steps to recover a life where face-to-face encounters with others is not the exception, but the rule. This for sure requires much more effort than commenting on a post or sending a text message. It requires your commitment, to the fullest extent. But only when we are fully immersed in a conversation can we understand each other. Only when we are fully there can we create meaningful relationships.

Shanah Tovah uMetukah,
Rabbi Uri