

## Offlining<sup>1</sup> Toward Paradise



*"I'll be on vacation until I find my cell phone."*

In this new year, as your new rabbi, I'd like to try something new. It's a little, well, different. And it's going to require some participation on your part.

If you feel comfortable, please take out your cellphone, turn it on, and activate its most jarring or obnoxious ringtone. And hold them up, too, so we can all see and hear. (Yes, I'm serious. You'll have to trust me...)

Notice that sound. That image. Remember what that feels like...

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In the futuristic Disney/Pixar film *WALL-E* (2008), a planet overrun with garbage has forced all humankind into space. It's a pretty bleak picture: the humans of the future are permanently situated in armchair hovercrafts. Their bodies are bulbous, blob-like. Their muscles have atrophied, as have their memories of using them. They are grossly unsuited for any physical activity, such as getting out of their chair. All of their nourishment, if you can call it that, comes in a cup, through a straw. And, most strikingly, all of their interactions with the outside world and with each other are mediated by a screen permanently situated in front of their faces.

It's an exaggerated vision of the future, but looking at society today, it's getting easier to imagine it. This year, a new study by the Kaiser Family Foundation<sup>2</sup> found that children age 8-18 spend more than 7.5 hours PER DAY consuming media. That's more than 53 hours PER

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<sup>1</sup> [www.offlininginc.com](http://www.offlininginc.com)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm>

WEEK in front of a screen. There's something to be said for being more in touch with the world and better connected, but so much of it is shallow surfing, texting, and tweeting, in a blurry haze of multitasking. And it might just be changing the way our brains work.

Constant connection to technology can become an addiction. We feel more linked in and more productive. As the charming fellow I saw yesterday in the Blackberry Messenger (BBM) commercial cooed over his smartphone, "BBM *feels* faster!" However, this feeling is probably an illusion. As Matt Richtel reports in the NYTimes article "[Attached to Technology and Paying a Price](#)": "Heavy multitaskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, ...and they experience more stress." One avid multitasker admitted that he has "burned hamburgers on the grill, forgotten to pick up the children and lingered in the bathroom playing video games on an iPhone" (you know who you are...). More and more cities have enacted bans on Texting While Driving, since it seems to be as big a threat to public safety as drunk driving.

One researcher told a story about when he first started grad school, and the professor thanked him for being the only student who was paying full attention in class and not using a computer or phone. But he has since gotten an iPhone "and noticed a change; he felt its pull, even when playing with his daughter. 'The media is changing me,' he said. 'I hear this internal ping that says: check email and voicemail. I have to work to suppress it.'" A teenager interviewed for the article spoke about his difficulty focusing on schoolwork. When he studied, he said, "a little voice would be saying 'look up' at the computer, and I'd look up."

Perhaps many of us are feeling that pull right now, wondering when this sermon will be over, when the service will end, so we can step outside and turn on our phone, check our email, listen to our messages. How many of us have been at meetings where people text or even answer the phone? For technology and multitasking addicts, offline time is torture, or at least very boring. As one multitasker's wife reported, "It seems like he can no longer be fully in the moment." For how many of us does that statement ring true?

Scientists hypothesize that a primitive evolutionary impulse accounts for our addiction to technology and multitasking. Each stimulus, like an email or text, causes a "dopamine squirt" in the brain, which leads to a rush of excitement. According to experts, "The lower-brain functions alert humans to danger, like a nearby lion, overriding goals like building a hut. In the modern world, the chime of incoming email can override the goal of writing a business plan or playing catch with the children."<sup>3</sup> In the absence of these little bursts of adrenaline, life seems boring -- apparently, even the important things.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html>

This past June, leading up to Father's Day, two marketing executives started a campaign to address this addiction. They call it Offlining, and here's what they say about it on their website ([www.offlininginc.com](http://www.offlininginc.com)):

We've devoted much of the last couple of decades to convincing you to log on, click here, call now, surf, search, pay bills in your underwear, trade from the beach, add "friends" to your digital network and, as AT&T once famously promised in their "You Will" campaign, tuck your children in from your mobile device.

Then one day we made a mistake -- we looked up. We took our eyes off the screen long enough to see. We noticed we had kids and wives. We took in the way leaves open their faces to the sun. We reacquainted ourselves with the sounds birds make. And we realized these things could no longer compete...

All around us, all the heads in all the malls, airports, and train stations seemed bowed in reverence to the device. Life had become multi-screen, multi-task, multi-plexed, mashed-up, an unrelieved contest for diminishing attention...

The two execs have created two ads to spread the word. One shows a hand holding a Blackberry with an incoming call from work. Behind the phone, just obscured from view, is a toddler with a party hat on, obviously celebrating a birthday. The caption reads: *Disconnected?* The other ad shows a finely dressed man, lying lifeless in a coffin, his hands folded over a Blackberry on his chest. The caption reads: *How do you want to be remembered?*



The Offlining advocates go on to remind us, "We invent technology to be our servant, not our master." But they are also careful to be middle-of-the-road:

We're not fundamentalists... And we're not anti-technology -- on the contrary, we love technology and all it can do for us. But we're only going to enjoy those benefits if we learn to use the Off Button.

Finally, they urge their readers to make an Offlining Resolution; you can sign a pledge on their website. They encourage us to commit to a weekly Offline Shabbat. Their current campaign, which I commend to all of us, is to make this Yom Kippur an Offline day -- a Technology Fast, if you will. Just as we fast to remind ourselves of the meaning and holiness of the day, why not try disconnecting yourself from your web devices and reconnecting with family, friends, God, yourself?

In the movie *WALL-E*, it takes an accident for two hover-chair-bound humans' hands to touch and their eyes to meet. The result is revolutionary. People start to talk to each other. To notice each other. To care not just about what's on their screen but also about building a future together.

Finding this kind of human connection should not depend on an accident. We can choose to cultivate it. This morning, let's take a minute to do just that. What I'm about to propose may take you outside your comfort zone again, so I invite you to have an open mind. And, if you would prefer not to participate, that's ok, too. What I'd like you to do now, for about 8 minutes, is find someone near you -- maybe someone you don't know as well -- and have a conversation. I'd like to invite you in your pairs to take 4 minutes each to tell a story of a time in your life when you experienced a deep, real connection to another person.

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While you are finishing up, note the sound and image in this room. Contrast this with the sound we started with -- the *tohu va'vohu*, the chaotic void of electronic noise. This is the sound of humans being human. Of life happening.

I hope this conversation is only the beginning of a new year of richer relationships and deeper connections, of knowing when to put the device down and look up. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote about the two kinds of relationships we have in this world, I-It and I-Thou. Most of our lives are I-It moments, where we interact with a machine or even a person in a superficial way, treating the other as a tool to accomplish a task. This isn't always bad; for example, paying a cab driver is an I-It interaction with obvious benefits.

But it's been said that "all real living is meeting."<sup>4</sup> A life spent entirely in I-It relationships would be shallow, empty, void of substance. The real meat of life is in meeting: eye to eye, face to face, hand to hand. In an I-Thou moment, we glimpse the infinite value and dignity of another human being. When we step out of the shell of our limited selves -- when we push the off button and put the screen away -- to lend a hand, make a new friend, be present for someone in need -- we bring holiness into the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Mike Gecan, *Going Public*.

We started with an image of chaotic noise. We then witnessed an image of face-to-face personal encounters. I want to leave you with another image, this one from the Torah. In the instructions for building the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert, God describes how the ark should be decorated.<sup>5</sup> It is to have a cover of pure gold, with two golden cherubim (winged figures), one at each end. They should face each other. But this is not just an ornament, for God continues: “There I will meet with you and speak with you -- from above the cover, between the two cherubim that are on top of the Ark -- about all that I will command you for the Children of Israel.”<sup>6</sup> The God of Israel deems THIS spot worthy of the divine presence. It’s not because it’s gold, or because it’s ornately sculpted. It’s because of the sanctity of the face-to-face encounter. God chose THAT image, of all places, as the site of revelation!

The question for us is: will we make space in our lives for the human interaction that invites revelation, holiness, divine presence? Or will we be too busy checking our email?

May the new year be sweet and full of moments of connection -- especially *offline*.

Shanah tovah!

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 25:17-22

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