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Bringing (and Finding) Timeless Values for an Ever-Changing World

As the nineteenth century was drawing to a close, the industrial revolution was creating a whole host of technological innovations: the train, allowing people to travel farther and faster than ever before. The telegraph, allowing people to send information over long distances. The telephone, allowing people to hear each other's voices, even when they weren't in the same room. And so when one Hasidic rebbe told his followers that all of these new technologies had something to teach us about how we lead our lives, his followers thought that he was simply engaging in hyperbole.

So they asked him: "What can we learn from a train?"

The rebbe answered: "That because of being one minute late, you can lose everything."

"All right," said his followers. "What about from the telegraph?"

"That for every word you pay."

His followers kept pushing him. "Surely, though, we cannot learn anything about life from the telephone!"

"Indeed we can," the rebbe answered. "We learn that what we say here is heard there."¹

When new technology comes along and changes our world, it forces us to adapt to new ways of interacting with each other and with our surroundings. And just as the train, the telegraph and the telephone radically altered the world in the late nineteenth-century,

¹ Adapted from Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*, 68-69

technology today is drastically changing the world of the early twenty-first century. Time Magazine realized it when it named “You” as Person of the Year in 2006 – blogs now allow ordinary people to become widely-read authors, the iPod and iTunes allow everyone to become their own record executives, and YouTube lets people become their own film distributors. In a world where our high-end laptop today becomes ridiculously obsolete tomorrow, where can we find timeless values? Is there anything permanent that our world still stands on?

A little over two thousand years ago, a man named Simon the Righteous told us what *his* world stood on: “*Al sbloshab d’varim ha’olam omeid*: The world stands on three things. *Al batorah*, on Torah, *ve’al ha’avodah*, on sacred work, *ve’al g’milut chasadim*, and on acts of lovingkindness.”² These ideas have resonated so deeply within the Jewish imagination that we continue to say them even today when we take our Torah scrolls out of the ark. But since our world is so radically different from that of Simon the Righteous, it is now upon *us* to determine what those ideas mean for *our* world. In many ways, we have the opposite problem from the rebbe’s followers. *Their* challenge revolved around integrating new technology into a worldview that had existed for centuries. But in our world, which is changing faster than ever, *our* challenge is to determine what the eternal concepts of Torah, sacred work, and acts of lovingkindness can teach *us*.

So we begin with Torah, because one of the hallmarks of our society is the instantaneous access almost every person has to endless amounts of information. In the words of computer executive Alan Cohen, “Google [has become] like God. God is wireless, God is everywhere [but if you have any questions,] you ask Google.”³ Now, Judaism has always been a religion that has valued the acquisition of knowledge and learning, and so

² m *Avot* 1:2

³ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat* (2007), 185

when we say that “our world stands on Torah,” on the most basic level, we are talking about the importance of learning. But as journalist Tom Friedman notes, “The challenge for the next generation of parents, educationists and thinkers will...not be the dissemination of information, but [how we]...differentiate between information and wisdom.”⁴ Learning – Torah – for our world today is not a question of finding data but rather, the issue of finding *wisdom*.

The Talmud tells a story of a non-Jew who was willing to convert to Judaism on the condition that a rabbi could teach him the entire Torah while the rabbi stood on one foot. He first approached the great scholar Shammai, who beat him away with a stick, essentially telling him, “You think you can learn all of this in such a short period of time?!” Shammai equated Torah learning with *information* – with a knowledge of facts, and it would have been impossible to absorb such a vast amount of knowledge. In contrast, when the potential convert came to Hillel, Hillel gave the now-classic answer, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. All the rest is commentary – now go and learn it.”⁵ All that knowledge, all those years of history, and teachings, and information – all of the Torah – for Hillel, they were the myriad ways we *live out* our values. Hillel was not concerned about whether the Jew-to-be could *gain* information. *Anyone* can gain information. Hillel was most interested in whether the potential convert turn information into wisdom.

Today, we can easily Google statistics about poverty, the number of casualties in Iraq, or how many Americans do not have health care. But it is Torah that prompts us to *act*, to give us the tools to better our world. We do not learn Torah simply to gain information, but to help make the right decisions. “Which is greater,” the Rabbis ask, “study or action?”

⁴ Friedman, 312

⁵ b *Shabbat* 31a

Study,” they answer, “because it *leads* to action.”⁶ “Torah” in 2007 is not about reading the Wikipedia entry on Moses. It is about engaging with our texts, and then living out their values. To “have the world stand on Torah” is to realize that while we will never know everything, we should be seeking the *wisdom* we need to better ourselves and our society.

But one of the great obstacles for knowing what needs to be done is our inability to focus on one thing at a time. We say that we “multi-task,” as an attempt to be more productive. But in fact, when we try to answer an e-mail at the same time that we talk to a colleague on the phone while a third person waits in our office, we end up in a state that is known as “continuous partial attention.” We spend so much time trying to get twelve things done at once that we don’t devote our full attention to any of them. And that leads us to the second thing upon which the world still stands today – *avodah*, sacred tasks, especially in the context of a sacred community.

Avodah has always had a connotation of holy work. Originally, *avodah* was the priestly service in the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed, it came to mean the communal prayer service. But whatever the sacred duty, it always required the participants’ total engagement – the Talmud even teaches that when we pray, we should not stop “even if a snake is wrapped around our ankles.”⁷ When we perform *avodah*, sacred tasks, we are required to be fully present for our duties – and in our world today, “being fully present” is far from our default setting.

Tom Friedman, in his best-selling book *The World is Flat*, shares an insightful (and somewhat disturbing) tale of post-modern life. In his words:

In the fall of 2006, I took a...trip to Germany and France.
The night I arrived at Paris’s Charles de Gaulle International
Airport, I was met by a driver ...[who] was carrying a sign

⁶ b *Kiddushin* 40b

⁷ m *Berakhot* 5:1

with my name on it, and as I approached him, I noticed that he was talking to himself, in French, very animatedly. As I got closer, I realized he had a Bluetooth wireless phone clipped to his ear and was deep in conversation with someone else. I pointed at myself as the person he was supposed to meet. He nodded and went on talking to whoever was on the other end of his phone...After the car started to roll, I saw that he had a movie playing on the little flat screen in the dashboard, the one that usually displays the GPS road map...[while] I was in the backseat trying to finish a column on my laptop...When I had written all I could, I got out my iPod and put in the earphones...

As we arrived at my hotel, I reflected on our trip: He and I had been together for an hour, and between the two of us we had been doing six different things. He was driving, talking on his phone, and watching a movie. I was riding, working on my laptop, and listening to my iPod.

There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other.⁸

When we feel like Batman, with a cellphone, a PDA and a pager all clipped onto our belt, ready to respond in an instant to whatever crisis might conceivably arise, we may, like Friedman, end up ignoring the person standing right in front of us. And so through the full attention that sacred deeds require, *avodah* leads us to reconnect to with each other.

Indeed, sacred acts are what create a sacred community. We describe ourselves as a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, the congregation that we strive to become. And in his revolutionary book *Rethinking Synagogues*, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman explains exactly what a “sacred community” can be:

[It] reinforces connectedness and overcomes alienation. Its worth is measured in the sacred acts and relations that connect us to one another...[W]e pursue them for their own sake. But they [also] have consequences: evoking love, respect, good deeds, mutual care, reverence for each other’s stories – the things that provide true connectedness.⁹

In an era when we often become so emotionally disconnected from each other, living in a state of “continuous partial attention,” a sacred community is a place to truly see and be with

⁸ Friedman, 515-516

⁹ Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Rethinking Synagogues*, 142

each other – to share joys, to share sorrows, to learn about ourselves and our neighbors, and to improve our world.

And that leads us to the third and final thing upon which our world still stands: *g'milut chasadim*, acts of loving-kindness. But in this realm, new technology can be a boon rather than a burden, allowing our small actions to reach farther than ever before. In 2004, the Nobel Peace Prize was given not to a president, or a prime minister, but to a Kenyan woman named Wangari Maathai. Thirty years ago, Maathai saw the problems of sustainable development and a lack of women's rights in her home country. So, she began a tree-planting effort to promote soil and water conservation, with the hopes that if women could feel ownership over the land, they could feel more empowered over their lives. She started a grassroots organization, which soon became the Green Belt Movement, helping Kenyan women plant 30 million trees. It then became the Pan African Green Network, spreading that message across the continent. Today, it is the Green Belt Movement International, and seeks to plant one billion trees over the next decade.¹⁰ As Maathai herself says, "The planting of trees is the planting of ideas. By starting with the simple act of planting a tree, we give hope to ourselves and to future generations."¹¹

Only in our world today could one small idea so quickly become an international movement. The story of Wangari Maathai is found in President Bill Clinton's new book, entitled *Giving*. But there is a reason he subtitled it *How Each of us Can Change the World*: Even our ridiculously obsolete laptop can help ideas spread across borders – technology today leads small acts of lovingkindness to reach farther, wider and deeper than ever before. And yet that also entails an even stronger obligation than ever before. As Clinton reminds us,

¹⁰ Bill Clinton, *Giving*, 8

¹¹ <http://greenbeltmovement.org/a.php?id=178>

The modern world, for all its blessings, is [still] unequal, unstable, and unsustainable. And so the great mission of the early twenty-first century is to move our neighborhoods, our nation, and the world toward integrated communities of shared opportunities, shared responsibilities, and a shared sense of genuine belonging, based on the essence of every successful community: that our common humanity is more important than our interesting differences.¹²

Today, what we do – and what we *don't* do – reverberate far beyond our own neighborhoods. *G'milut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, and *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, are becoming more and more synonymous – and it is our responsibility to act on that convergence. Tom Friedman encapsulates both our sense of hope and our sense of responsibility in this new world we live in, reminding us, “If it’s not happening, it’s [simply] because [we]’re not doing it.” If our nineteenth-century rebbe realized that the telephone meant that “what we say here is heard there,” then today, “what we *do* here has an *impact* there.”

Indeed, our world is constantly becoming smaller and smaller and faster and faster. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. *Al sbloshab d'varim ha'olam omeid* – our world still stands on three things. But *Torah*, *avodah*, and *g'milut chasadim* have to be re-interpreted for – and brought into – the 21st century. If we want our world to continue standing, then our great task will be to turn information into wisdom within our sacred communities so that individually and together, we can improve our world.

May 5768 – a year that will doubtless bring new technology – be a year in which see our newest ideas through the lens of our most timeless values.

G'mar chatimah tovah.

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¹² Bill Clinton, *Giving*, 4