

Learning to Float
Beth Haverim Shir Shalom
Rosh Hashanah 5774

This summer, I learned to float on my back in the pool.

Yes, that's right. I learned to float.

Oh, I've understood the mechanics of floating in the past. I've helped teach two smallish people of my acquaintance how to do it, occasionally bribing them with Starburst candy for each second they stayed relaxed on their back. I've even done it myself from time to time in recent years, for a second or two, but never much more than that.

But this past summer, I decided, after watching my sons each have a prolonged back float in the pool at my mother's summer cabin, that it was time.

I didn't need anyone to teach me, really. Lay back in the water. Chin up. Allow your feet to rise. Breathe easily. You know, float.

At first, I couldn't do it.

I kept getting distracted. I got distracted by everything. I kept sinking. I was impatient, embarrassed, self-judgmental. I felt silly. I was surprisingly unnerved by the unfamiliar and strange sounds you hear under water. I was surprised to hear my own heartbeat. I had a hard time overcoming the strange sensation of not going anywhere in particular—I felt, surely, I should be moving in a direction—not just staying in one place. And, most of all, I had the feeling that if I didn't move, I'd sink. Each time I'd lay back in the water, I felt the strong urge to stand up after only a few seconds. I even tried to bribe myself with Starburst. Nothing helped.

But I didn't give up. The next day, I tried again. It went a little better, but not much. I kept trying. Eventually, on the fourth and final swimming day in Michigan, something shifted. "Lay back in the water," I said to myself. "Chin up. Let your feet rise. Breathe easily." And lo and behold, there I stayed. For 10 seconds. Then 20. Then 30. Then a minute. I had learned, despite myself. And I liked it. And I wanted to do it again, and again. I kept floating for a long time. And later in the summer, when we stayed at a hotel with a pool in Cleveland, I practiced floating some more. It was suddenly a rush—such an unusual experience for me—that experience of letting go, and floating. And my boys came over and floated with me, and we were there, in the moment, together.

Eventually, reluctantly, I got out of the pool and lay in the sun, basking in my newfound skill. And I realized that I wasn't so good at lying there, either. I got distracted by my thoughts. I was unnerved having my eyes closed, hyper aware of the sounds around me. I felt like I should be doing something, motivating, moving.

Now, the psychologists in the sanctuary might be diagnosing Attention Deficit Disorder in their rabbi, but I'm fairly sure that's not what was going on. Because at that moment, just before I was to get up from that comfy pool chair because I was so uncomfortable just sitting, I had a thought.

My phone.

I reached for my phone, logged on to Facebook, and I instantly felt much better. And as I looked up for a moment, with a sigh of relief, I realized that of the 8 adults and one teenager at the pool that beautiful Michigan summer day, one adult was passed out on her pool chair with her phone in her lap. The other 8 of us were pecking away on our phones, blissfully ignoring the breeze, the sun, and each other.

Upon reflection, that weird story left me wondering. Just what the heck is going on? Maybe it isn't just me, I thought. Have we all forgotten how to live in the moment, be where we are, be fully present, without an electronic screen between us and the world? Have we all come to believe that, if we float, we'll sink?

Look- I love technology... I tweet @ravmoss, I spend plenty of time reconnecting with old friends on Facebook, I like using technology in worship, in weekly videos, in High Holiday greetings, in Kadimah; I even occasionally SKYPE with wedding couples I'm working with. Heck—my notes for this sermon are here on my iPad! I am not anti-technology by any stretch.

And, as much as I love technology, I also I wonder about its impact on us as human beings. And I'm not the only one who wonders.

Neuroscientists have studied dopamine since 1958, when 2 scientists at the National Heart Institute in Sweden first examined how the chemical functions in the brain. Dopamine plays an influential role in mood, attention, memory, understanding, learning, and reward-seeking behavior. Dopamine is what makes us seek pleasure and knowledge. It's what makes us search, whether it's for food or sex or information.

When we're rewarded with a response, dopamine is what makes us want more. When we're up late at night linking from website to website, or compulsively texting or checking email on vacation (AHEM), those are dopamine-induced loops. For each new piece of information, or for each new response, our brain rewards us with a dopamine surge, so we click again, and again, and again, until we're overloaded and over stimulated, and we can't sleep, and we can't sit still.

Just as we can discover—the hard way—what constitutes too much sugar or too much alcohol, I believe we are only beginning to truly understand the effects of too much uninterrupted technological stimulation on our brains. As we rush joyfully into this era of hyper-linked human evolution, we need to evolve and adapt and be mindful of what we are doing to ourselves when technology starts to blind us to the beauty all around us, and how being connected online affects our ability to do nothing once in awhile, or to rest, or to be fully present to the real live people all around us.

I'm not a scientist, but I feel that in our congregation, I have what sociologists might call a significant sample size. You tell me the stories that make my point. Some of you tell me you can't sleep, or that you stay up until all hours playing games on the computer. You tell me that you and your kids don't know how to be bored, how to just sit quietly and observe the world. You tell me that you feel alone even though you have hundreds of Facebook friends. You tell me that you don't have time to pray or study or have a date night or light Shabbat candles, and then in the same conversation you tell me how many hours you spend on Amazon.com or Youtube. You tell me that you have a tough time concentrating or living in the moment or making time to meditate or exercise because you feel dragged into the future by what you only-half-jokingly call your crackberry. And sometimes you tell me these things as your phone buzzes away with status updates, voicemails, texts, tweets, emails, and Foursquare check ins. There's something wrong with this picture, and we ought to be able to figure out how to address it somehow.

It's amazing to me how much technology encourages connectedness on the one hand, and retreat at the same time. Technology gives us the illusion of presence and the impression of efficiency, all while leaving us unfulfilled, harried, agitated, and somehow disconnected from ourselves and those around us.

When we sit together in a room with loved ones or friends, or around the dinner table, or around the pool on a beautiful summer day, or on a bench in a museum, each of us on our gadgets, we are, I submit, becoming more and more like people more likely to forget others. We are becoming less and less able to appreciate our surroundings. We are increasingly alone, together.

Like water carving a rock over time, our humanity is carved by our habits.

Most of our communication technologies began as what author Jonathan Safran Foer calls “diminished substitutes for an impossible activity.” We couldn’t always see one another face to face, so the telephone DID make it possible for us to reach out and touch someone. We aren’t always home, so the answering machine DID make it possible for us to communicate in a way, even if the other person isn’t available. Online communication originated as a substitute for speaking on the phone, which was deemed, for whatever reason, too burdensome or inconvenient. And then came texting, which CAN facilitate faster and more mobile messaging. These inventions, Foer argues, “were not created to be improvements upon face to face communication, but a declension of acceptable, if diminished, substitutes for it.” Each innovation communicates less, until we’re down to 140 characters on Twitter, (which some might see as an advantage, but I’m not so sure).

But then a funny thing happened: we began to prefer the substitutes over the real thing. And, since it’s the High Holidays, and we’re among friends, we can admit a few things to each other here in this room.

If we’re honest, we can admit that it’s more efficient to call someone than to *shlep* over to see them, even when they live on the same street.

And, deep down, we all know that leaving a message is easier than having an actual phone conversation—you can say what you need to without a response, it’s easier to leave bad news on a voicemail; it’s easier to touch base without the pesky entanglements of an actual conversation that can veer off topic.

WITHOUT raising your hand, who here has ever made a phone call on purpose when you knew no one would be there to pick up? Be honest with yourself...

And it’s much easier still to send off an email, because we can hide behind the absence of vocal inflection, and of course, there’s no chance we’ll accidentally catch someone and get caught having a long chat. And texting? That’s the best! You don’t have to even speak in full sentences or use conventional spelling rules.

These technologies are not evil; I’m not going to stop using them, nor am I suggesting you should. The problem is when we use them instead of, in place of, old school technology—face to face, one to one; when we use them as our first instinct—to escape the world rather than to engage it; when we use them to avoid rather than connect; when they begin to feel like a lifejacket we can’t ever remove.

Steps forward in technology are almost magical—when they help us connect with old friends; when they allow us to see the moving faces of grandparents who live states away; when they enable us to collaborate and cooperate across vast distances; when they help us feel safer to venture out of our comfort zones. The technology that we’ve created—that now dominates our work and home lives—gives us a plethora of new possibilities: the ability to experience more emotions, share knowledge, and take in diverse ideas from across global borders.

Neuroeconomist Paul Zak has found that social networking, in addition to producing a rush of dopamine, also creates a burst of oxytocin, the hormone responsible for bonding, empathy, trust, and generosity. Writer Tiffany Shlain says, “I sometimes imagine that every post, tweet, and text is flooding the planet with oxytocin, making us more empathetic and inclined to share and collaborate.” (As an aside, perhaps that’s why so many people overshare on Facebook!)

And yet, the magic cuts both ways. Technology can make things easier, but something is amiss when these steps forward make it easier to avoid the emotional work and power of face to face presence, to avoid the importance of conveying humanity rather than just information, to avoid the need to check in with our own emotions, and to avoid the requirement to be with people at all, except in a virtual way. There’s a problem when technology that intends to celebrate connection in reality encourages withdrawal.

The technology we’ve created also takes something away from us: being present, focused, and in the moment, open to floating and just letting the experience come. Rather than appreciating whatever we’re doing at any given moment, we’re left wondering what we might be missing if minutes go by without us refreshing our screens.

Again, without raising your hand, have you ever faked the need to use the restroom to check email? Researchers at the National Institute on Drug abuse have compared the sense of technological dependency—the feeling that we must be accessible and responsive at any time and in any place- to that of drugs and alcohol.

And, too, each step marches us further towards misunderstanding. As Israeli journalist Gershon Gorenberg wrote recently. “The voice on the phone has no unhappy shrug of the shoulders.” There’s no way to know whether the email was meant literally or ironically; did they really intend the emotion of that text message, or am I over-reading it? And, it seems to me, the more easily a message can be forwarded, the less wise it is to say anything that matters, lest our private words be passed on to 10 actual friends, 1000 Facebook friends, or 100,000 Twitter followers or retweeters. So we end up either saying irretrievable things we’d never use a megaphone to say in a crowd, or we end up feeling constrained to say nothing of significance for fear that we might be misunderstood, misquoted or ignored.

And yet we keep checking all of our devices, eagerly and desperately, as long as we can keep our eyes open at night, and then from the moment we awake, as if the next burst of characters might somehow, finally, actually link us in, help us find our way, bring us the meaning we’re longing for.

Twentieth century Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas once wrote: the most important thing in life is seeing the face of another person and responding to it. Seeing the face of others, he says, is the beginning of ethics, philosophy, and faith. Everyone wants their parents’ or friends’ or partners’ undivided attention—even if many of us, especially children, are used to getting far less.

And Simone Weil once wrote, “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” On this definition, it seems to me, our relationships to the world and to each other are becoming more and more miserly.

Our technology doesn’t make us avoid human connection, despite the rewarding hormones it makes our system flood with, but it surely makes it easier for us to miss the beauty of the world around us, and the people in it. Email doesn’t make us heartless, but surely the more distracted we become, the more emphasis we place on speed at expense of depth, the less likely we are to take the time to listen, to think before we hit reply all, to rest, to breathe, to reflect, to care, to float.

So what are we to do? Do we have a choice to buck the conventional wisdom, to do something countercultural, in the interests of human connection?

What if you instituted a rule for yourself and your family not to use technology at the dinner table or in your bedroom? Could you get a dopamine rush from what you’d learn from each other about your respective days? Could it leave you craving the pleasure of the company of your friends and family? Could lifting your gaze off the screen and into the eyes of another person affect your mood, your attention, your memory, your sleep patterns, your ability to actually hear what others are saying, to truly listen to the beating of your own heart?

It’d be hard at first, I can almost guarantee it. You’d be uncomfortable. It’d be a little like what I imagine withdrawal to be like. You’d feel like you need to touch that phone, like some Ring of Power.

But I’d urge you to not give up. You can do it: join me in a new year’s resolution- no technology while you're eating- no phones at the table. Let me know how it goes. You might just find friends and followers you never thought possible.

And here’s a radical idea: Try taking 24 hours in a row each week to be fully present to the people right in front of you. Hear their voices. Try, Emmanuel Levinas might say, to have a day when everyone has a face. Try a Computer and smartphone-free Shabbat. Instead, look at live faces. Or read a book. Or play an actual board game. Or work on a 2000 piece puzzle. Or do a crazy baking project. Or learn. Or pray. Or just sit and do nothing at all- try that. Your choice. See what happens. And don't just try it for a week before you decide it doesn't work for you. Give it at least 2 Shabbatot. See what you pick up by unplugging a bit.

I know—it's crazy, you're thinking. Our rabbi has gone Orthodox. It's crazy, you're thinking. Checking email couldn't possibly be what this 305,000 word text in our ark meant when it said not to labor on Shabbat. It's crazy, you're thinking. Get with the times, Rabbi. Asking us to relax by stepping away from the twitterverse? To go a whole day without updating our status? To go 24 hours without knowing if someone needs an answer to their email? What is this, 1993?

If you're asking yourself these questions, you're missing my point, exactly. This is a case where Rabbis Akiva and Hillel and all the rest in Jewish tradition would have responded wisely to the dilemmas of our age. They would challenge us to carve out a space where, to use Jonathan Safran Foer's words, we ourselves are not "diminished substitutes."

Nearly 2000 years ago, in the Mishnah, a group of rabbis puzzled out the 39 categories of activities that constitute work and were forbidden on Shabbat. It's a list of more or less everything that makes humans economic units. For one day, the rabbis argued, we shouldn't be constrained to the need to be productive and accountable to the outside world. For one day, they wanted us just to be aware of our own neshamot- our own souls, just to be with the other people around us, just to be with community, just to be with God, just to be- for one day a week.

I'm suggesting this morning that in order to be fully human, fully present to the needs of our own souls, and to other all week long, we might need to take a few waking hours each week, to stop checking in with foursquare, and start checking in with our souls, our fellow human beings, and our God.

I'm not suggesting that a Technology- free Shabbat is the only way to hit the off switch, or that treating the dinner table as a *mikdash me'at*—a small sanctuary-- will automatically make you pay attention to the real, unpixelated people around you.

But taking a meal to take a break from the celebrities on Twitter to follow the real people in your life; carving out your bedroom as a holy space reserved for checking the status only of your spouse; using a whole day each week to read only the texts of the faces of the people sitting across from you, can provide an opening—a doorway. And in a world of people hidden behind screens, a doorway is a gift. Step away from the screen, and, I promise, no one will get hurt. Happy floating.