

Other People's Prayers: A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5772

Delivered by Rabbi Katie Bauman; 9/29/11

In 2006, Time Magazine's person of the year was not a major political figure, a celebrity, or even a familiar face to masses. No, that year, Time's Person of the Year was ... **you**. Mazel tov! In the article that offered justification as to why famous individuals were overlooked in favor of you and me, the following explanation was offered:

We, meaning you and me, did all sorts of creative things – we made Facebook profiles and reviewed books and products online; we wrote songs and caught videos of newsworthy events on our phones. There was, and still is, an ongoing explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's you and me that are making it happen. And for seizing the reins of global media, TIME's named each of us Person of the Year.¹

The article illustrated that the world we live in is an incredible place that enables us to do remarkable things, and that is even truer now than it was five years ago. The advances of modern technology have changed the way we live on a daily basis, have changed what we're capable of on a global scheme, and have altered our expectations of what is possible in life. There is no denying it, and it is glorious to witness. And it's not just the Internet. It's the consumer-driven environment that defines our existence. We have everything we could ever want, right at our fingertips. And all we really need to get it is our own desires, our handhelds, and our money. The world has changed so much, in such profound ways, and so quickly, there's even humor to be found in the way we react.

I refer now to a wise social commentator, comedian Louis Ck and a rant he made on Conan O'Brian's show regarding technology and the modern world. The gist of Louis Ck's rant is this: We live in an incredible world, a world where almost anything is possible. But because of that, because this world has so changed our expectations, we don't even recognize the miracles among which we live and instead have developed an increasingly large sense of entitlement and isolation.

As an example, he told the story of the first time he was on a plane that had high-speed Internet, and he excitedly began surfing. But halfway through the flight, the Wi-Fi went out. The man next to him, the comedian recounts, became irate, expletive-happy, and dismissive of the flight crew as incompetent and the airline as a sham. Louis Ck stared at the man in disbelief and reflected to Conan: "How quickly did this man feel that the world owed him something that he only knew existed only 10 seconds ago?!" The catch phrase that you'd look up if you wanted to see this clip on YouTube, and I highly recommend it both for its comedic value and its insight, is "Everything's Amazing and Nobody's Happy."²

I'm not sure if "nobody's happy," but there's no doubt that we're completely absorbed in this wired, materialistic age in which we can instantaneously satisfy all momentary desires. Think about the incredible frustration we experience when we don't have cell phone service. It's as if the entire world is against us, or at the very least our cell phone company is.

¹ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8r1CZTLk-Gk>

Another example: Think about how we feel when we send someone a text message or an email and become angry when we don't get a response immediately. "What could she possibly be doing that is delaying her in getting back to me?" The subtext of this anger is two-fold: 1. It's so easy and 2. I'm so important. And these two assumptions truly define our time.

The truth is that most things *are* easier to do than they've ever been before, and we *are* more important and powerful as individuals than we've ever been. The cultural ambience in which we live has helped us recognize both of those realities and given us a sense of great new power over our own lives. Taking advantage of this power is something to be proud of and to celebrate. We deserved that award from TIME Magazine!

However, as with all sources of great new power, it has created an illusion, and this is the illusion of the 21st century: the more tools we have at our fingertips, the more access to what we want and the better the technology to get it, the *less* we need to depend on other people and the less they need to depend on us.

This is a dangerous illusion. It means that, if we accept it as fact, we are less and less apt to feel responsible for one another in any community, less apt to see ourselves as vital to the functioning of that community, less apt to be concerned about what our role is in other people's lives. According to recent psychological research on people in this internet age, when we sit in front of our computer screen, for example, many of us experience complete disinhibition.³ In other words, we tend to feel as if no one is watching us, no one even knows us, and we don't have any expectations to meet but our own. It allows us to hide from who we are and what we mean to other people.

While this is not entirely negative, it is one of the reasons that people do and say things online that they would never dream of doing or saying in person. It's one of the reasons that children who would never go into a crowded hallway at school and shout cruel slurs at someone or whisper into 100 people's ears a secret about a friend do enact such cruelty online, and this year drawing to a close is one in which we've seen the devastation realities of that type of behavior. Of course, it's not just the internet: advertisements, TV shows, the entire cultural ambience in which we live strive to make sure we believe that we are the center of our worlds and any impulse we generate is worth indulging.

But there is an even more dangerous aspect of this illusion, another side of the same coin. And it is that modernity, the technology, and the opportunities we have for instant gratification, offer us protection from the things we most fear.

There is a recent car commercial that features a father preparing his daughter to take her first drive alone. He's talking through the car window to a 5-year-old, reminding her not to text and drive, reminding her to call when she gets there but not while she's driving. When she pulls away, we realize that she's actually sixteen but of course still a precious little girl in her father's eyes. And his voice-over says: "We knew this day was coming. That's why we bought a Subaru." The subtext, and it's everywhere, is that it is a car that will keep our children safe on the road.

³ <http://users.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/disinhibit.html>

This is the illusion of our time: It is technology, the things money can buy, that will protect us from the world. There is very little acknowledgment of the fact that the other people we drive on the road with have a lot more power over our lives than the car we drive in. We all know this at crucial moments when we see our lives flash before our eyes – we slam on our brakes and the driver behind us is paying close enough attention to do the same; we’re going into surgery and a doctor is there to take care of us and get us through; we’re flying in a bumpy plane and the pilot lands it safely. We all know at those moments that while the *things* are important, it is the *people* on the road, in the operating room, or in the cockpit who time and again save our lives, people who answer our prayers. But the world we live in would have us forget that and instead believe that it’s me, my money, and my ability to be plugged in that will make me powerful, happy, and safe.

This fast paced, wired in, consumer-driven world that we live in that prizes expediency over all else produces the illusion that we’re sufficient being alone and that our old models of relationship are archaic, that we as a human race have changed in our fundamental needs, especially needing other people. But it has actually proven just the opposite. The paradox of it all is that even though our world seems to show how little we need other people, it has actually proven that we need each other more; that we all have prayers that can only be answered by other people, who are God’s hand and heart on earth. Disinhibited or not, wealthy or not, self-indulgent or not, we have discovered that we all long to be recognized and affirmed for our unique gifts; we all desperately want to connect with other people and feel close to them; and when we do connect, we can do and experience great things.

Jewish teachings have demonstrated this insight into human behavior for centuries. Our Jewish tradition, in every form of its literature, acknowledges the fact that we are impulsive, likely to do the expedient thing if given the choice, and often blinded by our own self-interest. But our tradition has insisted, since the beginning of its existence, that living like this, living without any sort of inhibition or sense of responsibility to others, is not only undesirable but also dangerous. It’s actually damaging in several ways: to ourselves, to other individuals, and to the community. On all fronts, so our tradition teaches, it tears each of us and all of us apart from the inside out and leaves us more vulnerable – not less – to the circumstances of life.

For example, in the Torah only a few weeks ago, we read of law that if a man comes upon a bird’s nest in the road and wants to take it, he must first send the mother bird away. He may not take the mother bird along with her babies. The text continues by saying that only if the man does this will he live a long and meaningful life.⁴

Our rabbinic commentators explain that even though it would be more food for the man if he took the entire family and that’s what he would want to do, to indulge that desire would be an act of callous selfishness, and callous selfishness and insensitivity wound us on the inside. Even if no one sees us, even if we’re never caught, we are injuring ourselves by giving in to such impulses.⁵

This teaching is just one of many that reminds us, with uncanny relevance, that we don’t naturally know how to care for others but that elevating our sense of duty in the world,

⁴ Deuteronomy 22:6-7.

⁵ Commentaries of Rashbam and Ramban on above verse.

elevating holiness in the mundane, training ourselves to be sensitive even when we'd rather be callous is a necessary act of self-preservation.

Another example: there is the very famous Chasidic story, adapted and mentioned in the movie "Doubt" of a man who has prone to gossip. His rabbi advises him to take a feather pillow and scatter the feathers all over the town. Then the rabbi tells him to go collect them, clearly an impossible or at least improbable task. The moral that this story teaches is, of course, that the damage we can do with our tongue is staggering, and much of it is irreparable. And this was most certainly before the Internet age.

This story is prophetic in that now, we actually do live in a time when the feathers we scatter are irretrievable. The feathers of our words in this age travel at the speed of light, cover the span of the globe, do it all in a fraction of a second, and last forever. Our tradition is wise enough to remind us that our impulses are not always good, our tongue is a dangerous and powerful weapon, and that whether it's a feather or a status update or a text, it is our responsibility to see that it does no harm.

Another facet: The major concern in this information age – if we were to look at it from a legal perspective – is privacy. How much can / will our privacy be invaded because people have such powerful tools at their fingertips? But this issue is not new. We've had to worry about issues of privacy for centuries. It's just a more paramount concern right now. But in Reform Jewish circles, the discussion of the major *new* moral implications is not to do with what malicious people do to us but what we do to ourselves. The important moral issue to keep in mind in this age is not privacy, but modesty. Judaism has always been concerned with how we portray and commend ourselves to others, and this is the skill that needs to be honed most vitally in today's world.⁶

And perhaps the most compelling of all, and the most difficult to factor in, is what the environment we live in would have us forget about living in community. A familiar Jewish concept is that of a minyan, the mandatory minimum of ten individuals we need to pray and perform other important mitzvot. The rabbis ask the question: why do we need to have a minyan? The familiar answer is that we need to draw strength from the community to pray.

But the rabbis go even deeper. They say that there is a compelling force about being in public. Being part of a minyan prevents us from hiding from one another, from forgetting that others count on us and we count on them. And therefore hiding is detrimental to our relationship with God.⁷ They recognized the intangible power of sitting among each other, of looking into each other's eyes, of feeling the yearning that each of us carries with him.

No matter how powerful our technology is, or how satisfying it is to get exactly what we want whenever we want it, that yearning and sense of indispensability can only be achieved when we stop hiding. Our rabbis of old remind us that communal contact is always the end goal because something mysterious and mystical happens when we share each other's space and encounter each other in our lives. We become even greater than the sum of our parts, and we remember that we do all share the world and affect it for one another.

⁶ Rabbi Mark Washofsky, Freehof Institute for Progressive Halachah: Judaism and the Internet.

⁷ T.B. Berachot 6b; 8a.

A world that changes this fast is an exciting and terrifying neighborhood in which to exist. But Reform Judaism, from its very inception, has always insisted that Jewish tradition holds within it timeless and powerful tools to help us cope with any reality, no matter how distant from the time when such tools were forged.

But in taking the position that we will not retreat from the modern world to protect our Jewish way of life, but rather use our Judaism to live better modern lives, we are faced with the difficult task of *searching* through our Judaism to find the proper tools to cope with reality. And this is not easy, has never been easy. It's so hard that many of us struggle with it all the time or have simply given up. The evidence: this sanctuary is full on Rosh Hashanah, and that is an incredible blessing for each of us. Why is it not full every Shabbat? Because of the difficulty of that struggle – many of us have doubts about Judaism's relevance to our modern lives. We are perplexed about how it fits in or have skepticism that it has anything valuable to offer and, rather than trust that it does and take the step to find it, we find other ways to fill voids and find answers.

But this is a unique moment in history. This is a moment when powerful forces surround us and make us think that “you” or “I” are the center of the world, that we need no one, and that we are little more than human beings filled to the brim with base instincts we cannot help but act on, and that it is futile to fight our worst impulses. This is a moment like no other, and no matter how savvy we are on our phones, no matter how plugged in we are, no matter how much stuff we possess, those tools have no conscience, no hesitation, no moral compass, and no lasting substance. They cannot point us in the right direction or remind us of the spark of holiness that resides in each of us. What can? No tool is more fit to center us, to ground us, and to remind us of what is really important, who we really are, and what we can really be to each other than our Jewish tradition.

Temple Israel may look like a thousand other buildings. But it is more than the sum of its brick, stained glass, familiar red carpets, and beautiful tapestries. It is a port in a storm of fast paced transience, materialism and impersonal connections. And it strives to represent the highest ideals of Jewish tradition. Those of us seated in this sanctuary have an opportunity to access, through this place and through the Judaism it perpetuates, substance, fulfillment, and meaningful communal connection, and Jewish tradition is, always has been, and always will be committed to that kind of existence, no matter what kind of cultural sea we are swimming in.

So I hope and pray that we find the courage to be counter-cultural. In a culture of “me”, let's affirm, strengthen, and be completely committed to a holy community of “we”. In a world where the typical answer is “because I felt like it”, let's affirm, strengthen, and be completely committed to the answer, “because it is right.” In an existence that identifies the other by saying, “You are your computer screen,” or “You are what you own,” let us affirm, strengthen, and be completely committed to this answer. “You are the answer to my prayers, and I am the answer to yours.” If we do all these, if we hold on to who we really are, the future is and will continue to be fresh, bright, full of possibilities, and a holy neighborhood, virtual and physical, to live in.