

The Power in our Pockets

The ancients believed text to be extraordinarily powerful. Our tradition recognized this power early on in two strikingly different ways. On the one hand, we have a legend that, at the Creation, God endowed Adam with a light by which his body shone brighter than the sun; so bright, by its light the entire world was illuminated. After the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, this light was consolidated into the words of Torah, so that it might be glimpsed through the study of a Torah text. A disquieting acknowledgement of the power of the word may be found in the practice of cursing. Our forebears believed in the efficacy of curses. Disquieting, yet refreshingly democratic - any bully or aristocrat would have to pause prior to giving offense; after all, any otherwise weak and disenfranchised widow or orphan might retaliate with a deadly curse. The creation story similarly empowers the ordinary individual. Only the First Person gets to be Adam, but anyone after him can access his literal brilliance via Torah study. The possessor of text could be virtually anyone, and that someone wields irrepressible power, capable of revealing the world, or of being weaponized to destroy someone else's.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim embraced the tradition that the text has power and that it is at the disposal of the individual. This long-ago hasidic rabbi recommended that everyone carry two strips of paper, one in each pocket. The paper in the right pocket should read, "The world was created for my sake." The one in the left should state, "I am but dust and ashes." The rabbi advised checking the right pocket when feeling diminished; and reaching for the left pocket when feeling over-confident. A text in the pocket could make all the difference in achieving a balanced, successful life. It occurs to me that nowadays our pockets

contain a robust/potent and versatile tool for shaping our lives and the lives of others.

I'm talking about our phones. Most of the time, we check the device in our pocket to connect with friends, relatives or colleagues. We may organize our calendars, google for information, take a selfie during our travels, or even find a blind date. Your phone can translate foreign languages. It's a universal remote that can set the house alarm, turn on the lights, and close the garage door from the other side of the planet. If you had "The Right Stuff", you could even leave the planet- the programs necessary for the 60's apollo launches to the moon could fit on a downloadable app today. I read recently (on my phone) that our phones will soon be helping patients suffering mild dementia by extending their ability to live independently. The phone can be set up to monitor your ECG patterns and predict if you are at risk of a stroke or heart attack. Perhaps of limited utility for the spiritually lost; it can save the actually lost. The phone is a tool with unparalleled versatility, but it is much more than that. It is a great equalizer. It can ambush the complacent. It can turn the tables on the powerful. It can threaten elites.

The phones align with a culture which casts off deference and rewards chutzpah. The right tweet at the right time can dramatically upset the status quo. Going viral can spread falsehoods as truthoods to thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, it can garner untold fame, it can ruin the lives of others. A reckless tweet or compromising image can ruin one's own life. Bad actors beware, you may be recorded by dozens of video cameras in the hands of random witnesses, eager and able to put your perceived misdeeds online for the world to see. Its power, whether in the service of justice or not, can be cathartic and infectious. Tweets and video are quick to pounce, slow to

nuance. If you are an iPhone user, your device is likely equipped with airdrop. This means that the phone may be used to instantaneously send an image, video, voice or text message to any other iPhone within a 30 foot radius; companions and complete strangers alike. This could be a lifesaver at a concert, rally or in an emergency. A few weeks ago, a teenager caused an airplane bound for Hawaii from Oakland to return to its gate because she accidentally airdropped a disturbing image to 15 fellow passengers. Imagine the potential panic at a concert, rally or emergency.

Our pockets are equipped to deliver a judgement which defies proportion, with no option of appeal. A new age of individual empowerment is within our reach. It could mean the preeminence of the individual. It could mean the tyranny of the individual. Virtually every individual on the planet now has or inevitably will have an unprecedented ability to shape how reality is perceived. The smartphone bestows upon the enterprising individual a megaphone, with the potential to reach out to a mass audience. Expertise is becoming outmoded; anyone can type a search. Anyone can text, tweet or post. Anyone willing to be spectacular or outrageous enough may launch a campaign. Untrammelled by our former insignificance, we are at risk for becoming unmoored. The guardrails are down. We may become post-truth. We may become post-shame.

Sadly, the phones are teaching us that the old Hasidic pockets contained messages which are merely apparently mutually exclusive. Rather than check or cancel each other out, they turn out to be co-conspirators. The reminder, “I am but dust and ashes” is nothing other than the message “The world was created for my sake” without limits. Texting can be expedient-“the world is mine”. Texting while driving can be lethal - a world destroyed.

An intemperate social media posting can forfeit one's job; an inappropriate image can forfeit one's dignity. The phones, which connect us with those who are not with us, paradoxically are correlated with less time together with those who might otherwise be with us. A particularly stunning development is an apparent link between excessive cellphone dependency and depression. Since the iPhone was introduced, in 2007, the rate for teen suicide has increased, and has skyrocketed since 2011. According to the Atlantic, some evidence points to the ubiquity of the smartphone as a major contributor to this crisis. The phones perpetrate the message "The world was created for my sake." Tragically, the isolation imposed by behaving as a sovereign individual can end in, "I am but dust and ashes."

The Biblical verses in the pockets empower the individual to change by harnessing the inspiration of the sacred text as an intimate and personal guidepost to life. Yet, how long can we remain self-conscious and attentive to the contents of our pockets? I've become aware that I've come to regard my phone as an extension of myself. It's a tool I'm seldom without, but forget I have; and my capacity would be sorely diminished without it. A pair of glasses maybe similarly taken for granted, perched on a nose, enabling details to come into focus and distant objects to come within visual range. The phone augments my mind. It is a repository for my memories; literally and metaphorically it is a flashlight which illuminates my way.

Like for many of us, my phone is the first thing I reach for when I wake up; it is my morning alarm. I view it before I sleep; it is the library for the novels I read to relax at the day's end. It governs and connects me to so many aspects of my daily existence. Unless it is Shabbat or a Jewish Holiday, it is in my pocket. If Judaism is

relevant to my life, Judaism must offer some insight as to what's it doing there.

This is not a matter of banning or encouraging greater cell phone use. Making the phones a prop for generational conflict and kvetching also does not interest me. “Halacha” refers to Jewish Law, but its Hebrew root means a “way of going along.” We need to evolve a halachah of the phone, a way of “going along” with it. We can see what it does technically. We can understand what it may change socially. We need to ponder its spirituality.

The phone, and its apps, run on code, which of course is a type of text. So, the ancients were right after all to believe in the extraordinary power of the written word. Text may vastly illuminate; and it may bring curses and destruction. The old elite are no longer the unrivaled guardians of our knowledge, culture, or leadership. That age is receding, and we wouldn't have back even if we could. Our future beckons at the touch of a finger. It is close at hand; carried in our pockets.

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