



Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein  
Rosh Hashanah Older Family Service 5774/2013

*Shanah Tovah!*

When Rabbis give sermons they often use words from another language; usually that language is Hebrew. Tonight I want to change that up a little and add a different language, one with which many of you are familiar. Don't worry: I'll give a simultaneous translation! Here it goes: Ready?

From my POV (point of view), when I STW (search the Web), sometimes I feel overwhelmed by all the information that's there.

In our personal digital communications there is information overload of a different kind: TMI (too much information). AISI (as I see it), this is not necessarily a good thing, and we shouldn't continue with BAU (business as usual).

Why? BC (because), BION (believe it or not), FYI (for your information), when we send an EMSG (e-mail message), post something on FB (facebook), send an IM (instant message) or Tweet, it is not FYEO (for your eyes only), even if we think it is. Too many of us, when we're on line, fail to heed warnings to MYL (mind your language) or to MYOB (do I need to translate this one?) Ok: "mind your own business." NTW (not to worry), I'm not going OT (off topic). I hope tonight to help us all DTRT (do the right thing) when we e-mail, IM, or post something on FB. What does this have to do with Judaism, you might say, or with RH (Rosh Hashanah)? SB (Stand by!!)



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We all use social media: adults, kids and teens. The typical teen Facebook user has 300 friends and 79 Twitter followers. In 2011 16% of teens used Twitter, while by 2013 this increased to 24%.

Social media give us an incredible ability to reach others: we can broadcast images, videos, and opinions widely to a large audience, quickly. Many good things happen because of social media: we can help others, share vital information, and raise money for good causes. The powerful tools of social media, however—if not used wisely— can cause harm.

A recent Pew Research Center Study shows that teens are recognizing that their use of social media can harm themselves.<sup>1</sup> The study reveals that, although teens are sharing more personal information than in the past on social media websites, most teens choose privacy settings for their Facebook profiles (60%). This indicates an increasing awareness of the need to protect themselves and their on-line reputations

We know that our on-line actions have consequences, not only for ourselves, but for others. There are ethical concerns raised by social media. Ethics help us know what actions are right and wrong in our lives. Tonight I want to talk about two inter-related ethical concerns connected with social media. The first is privacy, our own and that of others, when we use social media. The second is the potential that what we do on line can hurt others.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Teens-Social-Media-And-Privacy/Summary-of-Findings.aspx>



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ANFAWFOS: (And now for a word from our sponsor): Judaism! Yes, Judaism, the ancient tradition of which we are a part, can guide us!

Let's start with privacy: Judaism teaches that we must protect our own privacy and that of others.

In Judaism, rules about the the right to privacy are rooted in our belief in human dignity. This principle, *kavod ha'briot*, means respecting the worth of all of God's creations.

The legal concept of *hezek re'iyah*, which literally means "damage by seeing," is designed to guard against the physical violation of someone's privacy. The model for this law is God, Who calls out to Adam in the Garden of Eden: "Where are you?"<sup>2</sup> in order to give Adam a head's up that he is not alone. Even God respects the privacy of God's creations!

Specific laws in Jewish tradition emphasize the need to respect and protect the privacy of others. Two homeowners whose houses are close together, for example, must build a wall together so that neither can see into the dwelling of the other. Any damage caused by prying eyes is grounds for legal action. A decree issued by Rabbenu Gershom in the 10<sup>th</sup> century states that mail carriers and others are prohibited from reading others' mail, lest they spread gossip or give away business secrets. In Judaism, violations of

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:9



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others' privacy are so intertwined with the idea of *kavod ha'briot*—human dignity—that we can't have one without the other.

Judaism also stresses the importance of safeguarding our own privacy. Judaism teaches the importance of modesty (*tz'niyut*). Although modest dress is an important aspect of *tz'niyut*, *tz'niyut* is about much more than how we dress; it is about how we should act. *Tz'niyut* means having an awareness of and respect for God. A person who has this awareness knows, as Maimonides writes, that we are always standing “in the Divine Presence.”<sup>3</sup> A person who has such awareness is humble. The prophet Micah stresses this in a text with which many of you are familiar:

“It has been told you, O man, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you; only to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly (*hatzne'a*) with your God.”<sup>4</sup>

The word *hatzne'a* is from the same root as *tz'niyut*. God asks that we walk modestly on this earth, a quality given the same weight as acting justly and loving mercy.

So, how can we apply these Jewish teachings about privacy to our use of social media and e-mail? The first thing we must know is that **there is no such thing as digital privacy**. Richard Guerry, in his book “Public and

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<sup>3</sup> Mishne Torah *Hilchot Tefilah* 4:16

<sup>4</sup> Micah 6:8



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Permanent: The Golden Rule of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” notes that the world-wide web is a global PUBLIC forum for sharing information; it is not for keeping information PRIVATE.<sup>5</sup> Therefore we must be careful about what we write in e-mails, post on social media websites, and when we think of sharing an e-mail with someone else that has been sent to us. Our actions must show *kavod ha'briot*: respect for human dignity. Will what we post, forward, or send cause a violation of someone else's privacy?

Once we post something, we can't take it back! Even if we delete something from a website, we can't control older versions that “live” on others' computers or that circulate on line.

Not everything needs to be shared. Walking “humbly” with God and our fellow human beings means keeping some things to ourselves. We need to be aware, as Richard Guerry writes, that “with every action you take with your digital tools, you are leaving behind your digital legacy.”<sup>6</sup> Our digital activity is not only public, it is also permanent.

In addition to violations of our own or others' privacy, our on-line actions can cause harm to others. Social media make it easier to do good things, but also make it easier to say mean, judgmental, hurtful things we

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<sup>5</sup> *Public and Permanent: The Golden Rule of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Straight Talk about Digital Safety: the Real Consequences of Digital Abuse*, by Richard Guerry, p. 30. Balboa Press, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119



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would never say to someone's face. Social media make it easier to spread gossip, which can be hurtful.

Cyber bullying is the most well-known example of this kind of gossip. Cyber bullying can happen 24/7, and hateful messages can be posted anonymously and distributed with lightening speed to a wide audience; it is difficult or impossible to trace their source.<sup>7</sup> Once such messages are posted they are almost impossible to delete. Sixteen percent of students in a recent study report being electronically bullied— through email, chat rooms, instant messaging, websites, or texting.<sup>8</sup>

Jewish tradition teaches that words are powerful! God created the world with words: God speaks and various parts of the world—the sky, the earth, the seas, the sun, and the moon—come into being.

Our words have power, too.

The Torah forbids us from “going about as a tale-bearer” (gossiper) among your people”.<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word for tale-bearer is related to word for being a trader or a merchant. A person who goes about as a tale-bearer is someone who peddles or sells gossip.

The Rabbis expanded on the Torah's rule against spreading gossip, developing the prohibition of *la shon ha ra* (evil speech). *La shon ha ra* refers

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.stopbullying.gov/>

<sup>8</sup> Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011

<sup>9</sup> Lev.19:16



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to any speech that discredits or says something negative about another person **even if it is true**. Although everything we say might be “true” it is wrong to relate facts that put someone else down. The Talmud teaches that *la shon ha ra* hurts three people: the one who speaks it, the one who hears it, and the one about whom it is said.<sup>10</sup>

Our Sages regarded verbal wrongdoing as more serious than stealing money or property. “Anyone who shames his fellow in public, it is as if he spilled blood.”<sup>11</sup> Why? A person who has his money stolen can be repaid. If his property is stolen it can be returned. Verbal wrongdoing injures a person’s very self, and we cannot repay this kind of injury.

There is a Hasidic tale about a man who goes around the community saying bad things about the rabbi. After a time, he begins to feel guilty and goes to the rabbi to beg the rabbi’s forgiveness. “I will do anything,” he says, “to make things right.” The rabbi instructs the man to take a feather pillow outside, cut it open, and scatter the feathers to the winds. The man gladly performs this task, although he thinks it is strange. When he returns to tell the rabbi that he has completed the assignment, the rabbi says: “Now, go and gather the feathers. Because you can no more make amends for the damage your words have done than you can re-collect the feathers.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Arachin* 15b

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., *Bava Metzia* 58b

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.jewfaq.org/speech.htm>



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Our Sages could not have imagined a world in which the internet and social media would magnify the potential for and the consequences of *la shon ha ra*. One click of the “send” button and our words—for good or for ill—are accessible to countless others and do not fade with the passage of time. Yet, these ancient teachings, along with more recent ones, provide valuable guidance for us.

Rabbah, one of the greatest rabbis whose teachings are in the Talmud, taught:

“I follow the approach of Rabbi Yossi....[who said]: ‘I never made a statement for which [I would have to] turn around [and check whether the person about whom I was talking was present].’”<sup>13</sup>

Richard Guerry writes:

“Before you do anything with a camera, cell phone, or computer, imagine the person who means the most to you in the world standing over your shoulder. If you're [comfortable] with that person seeing what you're about to do, and you're [comfortable] with what you're about to do becoming part of your permanent legacy, go ahead. If not, don't do it.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Arichin* 15b

<sup>14</sup> <http://reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=3238>





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Richard Guerry says that we need a Digital Consciousness. I say we need a Digital Conscience.

Before we hit “send,” before we post something or Tweet, let’s think: is there any way what I am about to do could cause harm to others or to me? David McMillan writes that there should be a Social Media Golden Rule: post about others as you would have them post about you. Judaism has a similar and much older rule that says the same thing!

When Rabbi Hillel, who lived 2,000 years ago, was asked to summarize entire Torah while standing on one foot, he said:

“That which is hateful to you do not do thus to your friend. This is the whole Torah. The other is commentary. Go and learn.”<sup>15</sup>

You may be surprised to know that, although Hillel lived a long time ago, he taught in “tweets.” One of his most famous teachings is under 140 characters, and can help us develop our Digital Conscience: to look out for our own privacy and that of others, to consider others’ feelings before we post something that could be hurtful, to be constantly aware of the repercussions of our actions on line.

אם אין אני לי, מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני? ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי

*Im ein ani li, mi li? U'kh'she'ani le'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo akhshav, eimatai?*

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<sup>15</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a



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"If I am not for myself, who is for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"<sup>16</sup>

*If I am not for myself, who is for me?* Who will protect my privacy if I do not? *If I care only for myself, what am I?* If I put my need to gossip above the feelings of others, what kind of person am I? *If not now, when?* This is the time to change our actions. During the High Holy Days we promise ourselves to try be the kind of people God, and we, expect us to be. We don't need to be perfect, but we do need to try.

INNW. Yes: INNW, Hillel's teaching: "If not now, when?" is on the list of chat acronyms and text message shorthand that I found on the internet. How do you think Hillel would feel if he knew that? Although his first reaction might be: BSF (but seriously, folks)? BYAM (between you and me), I think he'd be happy.

So, TAFN (that's all for now), GGN (gotta go now). I hope to CUOL (see you on line), and here at TRS (Temple Rodef Shalom) as well, in the New Year.

*Shanah Tovah!*

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<sup>16</sup> Pirkei Avot, 1:14