

Holiness – Pokemon Don't Go

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Earlier this summer a visitor to our shul approached me with great excitement right after the Sunday morning Shacharit services. “Rabbi,” he said, “did you know that your shul has a Pokemon in it!”

Now forgive me for a moment, while I pride myself on being hip (at least for a rabbi) and au courant (at least for an orthodox rabbi), I simply did not know what this visitor was referring too at first. After all, Pokemon could sound like a Jewish last name, as in “Lightman,” “Wrightman,” “Goldman”, and “Pokeman.”

When I seemed confused by his proclamation, the visitor tried to explain, “You know Pokemon, these strange creatures hanging out in public spaces.” Now I was ready to take offense on behalf of Berkeley’s eccentric population. Ultimately however I caught on and realized that the excited visitor was referring to Pokeman – and now please forgive the technical lingo – the location-based augmented reality game that took the world by storm this past summer.

In the game, players use a cell phone's GPS to locate, capture, battle, and train virtual creatures, called Pokémon, who appear on the screen as if they were in the same real-world location as the player.

During the summer months, the game became so popular that several US Highways now display signs proclaiming that it’s illegal, not to mention completely unsafe, to search for Pokemon while driving.

In an article titled, *“Is ‘Pokemon Go’ good for the Jews?”* R. Jeffrey K. Salkin points out that Pokemon has also made appearances in unexpected Jewish places (and not only CBI!). For example, Pokemon has showed up at the Kotel, the Western Wall (and yes, Chabad did try to lay teffilin on it).

On a more serious note, R. Salkin notes that “Auschwitz has asked to be a Pokemon-free zone. So has the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Arlington National Cemetery.”

These locations, and among them I include the Kotel and our shul as well, raise a truly profound and fundamental question: What are the places where Pokemon Go shouldn't go? In the words of R. Salkin, “There are places that are so serious, so powerful, so exalted, so touched by eternity that they simply cannot give entry passes to the trivial and the time-bound.

Paradoxically, the conversation about places where “Pokemon Go” should not go is actually a conversation about the places where God should go.” (<http://religionnews.com/2016/07/18/is-pokemon-go-good-for-the-jews/>)

This question then does not only pertain to Pokemon Go. I believe it also applies to the use of our Smart Phones, Facebook, Instagram, and or all other social media forums. My question therefore is not only where shouldn't Pokemon Go, but also, where does my Smart Phone not belong, and or what does not belong on social media or even in an email exchange?

Beyond the realm of technology, the deeper question posed to each of us is how might we create spaces in our life that echo the ineffable and eternal?

The main ritual that took place on Yom Kippur at the time of the Holy Temple, centered around three axioms of sanctity or *kedusha* – *kedushat zman, adam, u'makom* (the sanctity of time, place, and personhood). At a specific time, the day of Yom Kippur, a designated person, the High Priest, would enter a specific place, the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies as the place of ultimate sanctity could only be accessed once a year by only one individual. This ritual offers a powerful model of sanctity. *Kedusah* could only be created through the setting of boundaries.

For a moment, let me try to tease this model out with specific examples by way of confession.

“For the sin of having brought my Smart Phone to the dinner table or coffee dates or weekday prayer service.”

“For the sin of having used my Smart Phone during meetings and while speaking with work colleagues.”

“For the sin of looking at my Smart Phone screen instead of the face of my beloved friend, a spouse or child, siddur or the road.”

As individuals who attend weekly Shabbat services and who strive to sanctify the day of Shabbat, we have a sense of the potential sanctity that is harnessed through letting go of our Smart Phones. In the ideal form, our device-free Shabbat services, and yes, even our device-free Shabbat kiddushes, can potentially teach us an important lesson about the level of focus on the here and now that we can attain if only we were not so busy constantly strolling down our touch screens.

Imagine the positive impact we might make on our daily interactions with people we love or work with if we dared to bring to these weekday interactions a measure of the sanctity of time and space that we strive to experience on Shabbat by limiting our own access to our Smart Phone devices.

In truth, Smart Phones are merely one example, and perhaps a simple one at that, of the sort of external distractions that threaten our social interactions. At many of our gatherings, small talk easily replaces real talk. At our dinner tables, politics too often replace words of Torah. And in our one on one discussions, gossip, or talk of others easily replaces conversation with one another.

I ask you tonight to commit to one weekly interaction, be it a meal, a relationship, a prayer service, or some other form of encounter, in which you will exclude the use of Smart Phones, or any other external distraction, during this upcoming year.

Allow me another confession...

“For the sin of shameless and constant self-promotion on Instagram or Facebook.”

“For the sin of communicating angrily, self-righteously, or just too rapidly on email.”

“For the sin of only seeing the surface, of highlighting the superficial, and rendering some faces invisible on social media and or regular daily social interactions.”

Here I must note an important distinction in Halakha. According to Jewish Law certain things might be permissible but not advisable. Jewish law also teaches: “*Vehamchmir tavo alv bracha*” – “those who take on certain unrequired strictures will be blessed.” Furthermore, “*Hasidim machmirim*” – “the pious ones are strict in this regard” though the masses may opt to be lenient.

While it would be very difficult to develop Halakhic guidelines for proper use of the internet and or social media, it is still critical to advance a number of loose guidelines in the spirit of “those who take on certain unrequired strictures will be blessed” and “the pious ones should act strictly in this regard.”

In a recent book titled, “False Facts and True Rumors – *Lashon HaRa* [negative speech] in Contemporary Culture,” R. Daniel Feldman raises a number of critical issues. R. Feldman writes, “It is abundantly clear that despite the great benefits afforded by the Internet, there are significant risks involved as well. [...] In the context of the careful balance necessitated by the laws of *lashon hara* [negative speech] and purposeful speech, it is instructive to become aware of both positive and negative ways in which the differences between online and direct personal interaction register an impact.” R. Feldman then proceeds to cite countless books and articles on this topic, of which I will now cite but a few. (R. Daniel Z. Feldman, “False Facts and True Rumors,” pp. 193-194)

In his book *Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality*, Dr. Elias Aboujaoude writes, “Anonymity can make it possible for people to “convince themselves that those online behaviors ‘aren’t me at all,’” [...]. If they “aren’t me,” it follows that they don’t reflect on me and that I’m not responsible for their consequences. This gives us carte blanche to engage in them with more abandon.” (Elias Aboujaoude, “Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality, pp.40-42)

Social-media interactions also threaten our perception of the true and or real. As R. Feldman argues, “There is a tendency for like-minded people who associate with each other to intensify their beliefs in one direction and to emerge more convinced and more extreme in their view.

This tendency can again detract from the likelihood of accuracy emerging.” (R. Daniel Z. Feldman, “False Facts and True Rumors,” p. 196)

The authors of *Wild West 2.0* term the skewed reality that can emerge from building a picture based only on that which is prominently available on the Internet as the “Google Truth.” This is defined as “Not the actual truth. Instead ... the stylized caricature version of reality that appears in a Google search for your name or the name of your business ... [It] may appear superficially accurate, but it is often incomplete and sometimes flat wrong.” (Fertik and Thompson, “Wild West 2.0, throughout)

These interactions also touch upon our ability, or more accurately, our inability, to do *teshuvah*, to repent whole-heartedly. This point is made powerfully by Sherry Turkle in her book, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.” Turkle writes, “Technology makes it easy to blur the lines between confession and apology, easy to lose sight of what an apology is, not only because online spaces offer themselves as “cheap” alternatives to confronting other people but because we may come to the challenge of an apology already feeling disconnected from other people. In that state, we forget that what we do affects others.” (Sherry Turkle, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,” pp. 233-34)

In his book “Moral Molecule,” Paul Zak put it this way, “Simply put, while technology creates new opportunities for connection, it can sometimes provide new opportunities for neglect.” (Paul J. Zak, “Moral Molecule, p.195)

Now I can tell that some of you who are not on Facebook or Instagram, or who are not major internet users, are feeling tremendous relief.

Not on Facebook...not my problem! Not so fast.

Our communications through email or social media, in some way, are simply a reflection of our normative social interactions. We don’t need fast pace email exchanges to realize that on many occasions, even in person, we spoke too soon, or said too much, or completely over-reacted.

And trust me, you don't need Facebook to render people invisible, we all do it, in some way or another, in-person, unfortunately, all the time.

Just as Shabbat can teach us a lesson about letting go of our Smart Phones, I believe that the world of kashruth (of keeping kosher) can teach us a lesson about sanctifying social media and social interactions.

As individuals who strive to keep kosher homes and a kosher diet, and who pay attention to what enters our fridge and our pots, we have a sense of the potential sanctity that is harnessed through setting certain boundaries. In the ideal form, our commitment to kashrut (to keeping kosher), can potentially teach us not only about what comes into our mouths but also about what comes out.

Imagine the positive impact we might make on our daily interactions with the people we love or work with if we dared to bring to these weekday interactions on social media, email use, or in person, a measure of the sanctity we strive to experience through kashrut.

I ask you tonight to commit to one weekly interaction, be it on social media or face to face, in which you will limit what you express, post, or boast.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies. *Kedushat zman, adam, u'makom* (the sanctity of time, of personhood, and place) suddenly meet. This unique encounter reminds us that sanctity is found within time, within space, and within human life.

In the poem, "*Yesh Makom*," Amos Etinger recalls with simplicity a sanctity that remains with him all his life. Etinger writes:

There is a faraway place, beyond the sea
There the sand is white, the home is warm
There the sun shines upon
The market, the street, the port
There is home, beyond the sea.

I remember the candle burning on the eve of Shabbat
And my father staring, staring into me, in silence.

It is a place that remains far away
For the songs of Shabbat, for laughter and prayer...

For every place to which I may escape
There is that place
My memory cannot erase
A place I carry in my heart
A place I love.

We each, in our own ways, have chased Pokemon to the wrong places or used our Smart Phones at the wrong time. We each, in our own ways, projected images of ourselves on Facebook, in one on one conversations, or in the company of friends, in ways that conceal who we really are. We each, in our way, robbed our exchanges with each other from ever entering the realm of the eternal and ineffable.

Tonight, I ask all of us to return from these places to which we too easily escape. Return from all the times that too easily escape from us. Return to a true image of our lives and ourselves, without false images or distractions. This Yom Kippur, as the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies, I urge us to remember the place that memory cannot erase, a place deep in the heart, a place of empathy, a place of gratitude, and place of humility, a place of sanctity, a place of love.