

Telling the Truth

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5778 – September 20, 2017
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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There was a time when I considered Facebook a frivolous activity. Sure I enjoyed seeing postings about people's vacations and celebrations of birthdays and anniversaries. But for the most part I considered Facebook a waste of my time.

I was annoyed with Facebook because it is so easy to get distracted by clickbait. Who can resist viewing a clip of a toddler dancing to rock music? Who is not moved by a video of a heroic rescue of a woman trapped in a flood? Who cannot stop from reading a political screed written by someone we agree with? I'd open up my Facebook Newsfeed and an hour would fly by and I had accomplished nothing.

But beyond my occasional irritation, I came to the realization that what really bothered me was how happy everyone seemed on Facebook. For the most part, people only share good things going on in their lives: their child's acceptance to college, their promotion in their job, the fantastic meal they just ate, the exotic vacation they just went on. And, to some degree, I confess, I felt envy. Everyone on Facebook seems to be having such a good time enjoying life. The Torah says: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house nor his wife, his male servant or handmaid." Perhaps we should add an update: Thou shall not covet your friend's Facebook updates, neither her photos nor her videos, her likes or dislikes.

Now don't get me wrong. I realize that as a congregational rabbi, Facebook can be a valuable source of information for keeping in touch with Temple Beth Torah members. Facebook is a means by which I can learn about what is going on in people's lives: who has lost a lot of weight through exercise, who just went to see Hamilton, who went to a ballgame with their kids, or who saw the solar eclipse in Oregon. None of this is earthshaking news but it does give me a feel for what's happening with TBT folks.

It is good for me as a rabbi to know about people's lives. But it is important to keep in mind that what folks post on Facebook does not reflect the totality of what people are really experiencing. Facebook does not show what is going on in our lives at a deeper level.

Most people filter what they post on Facebook. It is widely known that individuals have a strong tendency to only post things about themselves that put them in the best light. I recently read a book entitled *Everybody Lies: Big Data, New Data and What the Internet Can Tell Us About Who We Really Are*. The author, Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, does a deep dive comparing what people post on Facebook and contrasts that with the meta-data he collects from Google searches and other sources of big data.

He finds an enormous gap between how most people only show their best side on Facebook but when people do searches on Google, there is a far greater tendency to seek out solutions to negative issues.

Here is a quote from the book *Everybody Lies*:

“Facebook is a digital brag-to-my-friends–about-how-good-my-life is serum. In Facebook world, the average adult seems happily married, vacationing in the Caribbean, and perusing the *Atlantic* (monthly magazine). In the real world, a lot of people are angry, on supermarket checkout lines, peaking at the *National Enquirer*. In Facebook world, family life seems perfect. In the real world, family life is messy. It can occasionally be so messy that (Google searches show) a small number of people even regret having children.” He continues, “In Facebook world, it seems every young adult is at a cool party Saturday night. In the real world, most are home alone, binge-watching shows on Netflix.”¹

People are selective about what they choose to post on Facebook. They give a curated presentation of themselves, showing their more uplifting side and avoid creating the impression that they are not having the best time of their life. “On Facebook, we show our cultivated selves, not our true selves.”²

We post a photo saying we are having a fabulous time on a cruise but we don’t mention that we got food poisoning the night before. We give a status update that we are celebrating a wedding anniversary with our spouse, though there are no comments about the hellacious fight we had about leaving the house on time for our dinner reservation. We share that we are having a wonderful time at a family reunion yet there is no mention of the relatives we avoid because we cannot stand them.

Social media, be it Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram are not places where most people choose to share their real selves. We present our carefully crafted selves rather than who we really are. Lindsay Williams, a writer for *Relevant* states: “Most of the time, we don’t air our dirty laundry online for fear of what others might think. We only Instagram our best moments and tweet about the most extraordinary few minutes of our day... Yet, it’s only in our mess, in our brokenness, when we can become fully known.”³

Williams goes on to state that with social media, we can have virtual friendships with people all over the world. We even think these friends will offer us deeply felt emotional support. But there is something unreal about the nature of these virtual friendships. She writes that “the friends who know us best are those who have seen us at our worst—and loved us anyway. Those types of friendships are only crafted through the nitty gritty life moments that we’d all be too embarrassed to divulge on Facebook.” Our presentation on social media does not give – nor should it give – the fullest account of our lives. So where is it safe for us to do so?

The answer should be clear: the opportunity we have to be most fully ourselves is right here at Temple Beth Torah during the High Holy Days.

Whereas on social media we try to present ourselves as being perfect, in contrast during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are reminded constantly that we are imperfect. All human beings have foibles and shortcomings. We all have strengths and weaknesses, likeable parts of ourselves and unlikeable. But that is the human condition. We are not angels. We are mere flesh and blood.

With social media, it is possible to create a virtual community of people who share the same views as you do about social issues and the actions of our elected officials. If one of our Facebook friends expresses a viewpoint with which we strongly take issue, it is tempting to rid of ourselves of this disagreeable person by silently unfriending him or her.

But in a real community like Temple Beth Torah, we are not all going to agree with one another nor should we. Judaism has long celebrated the expression of multiple viewpoints. The way of Torah demands that we engage in debate as long as we do so in the spirit of Hillel, always respecting the integrity of someone whose view may not reflect our own.

Being in a real community means that not all of us will be friends. Of course, in a synagogue we want people to be supportive of one another and to care for each other. Temple Beth Torah is a genuinely caring community, remarkably open to people of a variety of ethnicities, races, and sexual orientations.

The true test of a community is how we relate to those people whom we may not like. Maybe there is someone you cannot stand because of the way he expresses himself in public. Maybe there is a person who triggers you because of how she conducts herself at temple. Maybe there is someone in the congregation who has done something wrong, who has wounded you by words or by an action, and it is really hard to get past how bad you feel.

On social media, you can totally avoid relationships that are complicated and troubled. But in a real community, there is a pathway to repair broken relationships. Judaism proclaims that we are not victims in our life's stories. There is a way forward, a methodology that we especially utilize during these High Holy Days when we practice doing t'shuvah.

The first step toward t'shuvah is when we engage in moral self-inquiry. We are called upon to ask ourselves: Where have I gone wrong in the past year? What sins have I committed willingly and unwittingly? How can I do better?

In addition to moral self-inquiry, the second step on the path of t'shuvah is to act. It is not enough to acknowledge our errors, we must make repair by asking forgiveness. During these Days of Awe, we seek forgiveness from God for all the ways we have failed to fulfill the ideals of Judaism. All of us have fallen short in God's eyes. But through heartfelt prayer and sincere confession, we can repair our relationship with God.

We must also have the moral courage to be willing to ask forgiveness from anyone we have harmed. It is tempting to avoid asking forgiveness from our family, our friends, our co-workers, or from members of this congregation. During this season of repentance, we are to seek out those people we have wronged. Only by seeking forgiveness can we work through the disruptions in our relationships. Only by doing t'shuvah through moral self-inquiry and asking forgiveness from God and the people in our lives can we repair our fractured world and begin this New Year with a full heart and soul.

These Days of Awe stand in stark contrast to the idealized selves we present on social media. Stephen Marche, a novelist and columnist writes, "Social media - from Facebook to Twitter - have made us more densely networked than ever. Yet for all this connectivity, new research suggests that we have never been lonelier (or more narcissistic) - and that this loneliness is making us mentally and physically ill... What Facebook has revealed about human nature - and this is not a minor revelation - is that a connection is not the same thing as a bond, and that instant and total connection is no salvation, no ticket to a happier, better world or a more liberated version of humanity." 4

Here at Temple Beth Torah we can be our true selves. We are mere mortals who are fragile and tender and vulnerable. Here we can feel safe and protected in our caring community. We stand together through good times and bad.

Social media is a useful tool for connecting to the world. However in this sacred congregation we aspire to a higher purpose: to fulfill our mandate to be God's partners, to create a life that is filled with purpose and meaning, to bring forth a world that is founded on justice and righteousness. In this sacred community, let us embrace one another with gladness and joy as we usher in this new Jewish year. In fellowship and friendship, let us affirm: *Hinei Ma Tov Uma Naim, Shevet Achim Gam Yachad*, Behold how good and pleasant it is when we are together in real time, in real space, in our sacred community.

- 1 *Everybody Lies*, Seth Stephens Davidowitz, pages 152-153.
- 2 *Ibid*, page 151.
- 3 "6 Ways Social Media is Ruining our Friendships," Lindsay Williams, *Relevant*, December 28, 2015.
- 4 "Is Facebook Making Us More Lonely?" Stephen Marche, *The Atlantic*, May 2012.

