

“TALMUDIC TWEETS”  
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Marilyn and I almost didn’t make it to our 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this past July.

Well, actually, I almost didn’t!

These were tense times down on Hilton Head this summer and it was all because of something as innocent sounding as... *Constant Contact*.

Here’s what happened. Our B’nai Jacob Newsletter (my e-mail to the congregation I started in 2005) had grown to such an extent this year that it was becoming virtually impossible to send out. I had countless corrupted e-mail addresses and an old system to send them that made things unmanageable. I was getting e-mails bouncing back to me with more and more congregants not receiving the e-mails. The twice weekly e-mail that started simply to keep people informed about what was happening in our shul was no longer doing that and had to change.

So this spring, I announced that by August, we would be redesigning and recreating the newsletter. You were all asked for several months to re-send me your address because we were going to start all over again (if you are

no longer getting the e-mails, that is the reason, my friend!) In addition, we were going to make the newsletter really “cool”, with easy to read bullet points, graphics and photos. Most importantly, it would be “deliverable”!

So this summer, while in Hilton Head, I discovered an on-line company that could help me make that all happen and for about \$8.00 a month. They would manage delivery, help me maintain a “clean” address book, constantly update things so I wouldn’t have to, inform me which addresses were bouncing and would automatically fix them or delete them, thereby not corrupting our data base. Their on-line do it yourself program had an extensive picture library, easy to use templates, and great tech support. I had found my solution through a service known as *Constant Contact*.

But, have I ever told you that I tend to be obsessive?

Obsessive may be too mild. *Constant Contact* took over my summer. I was at the beach thinking about how I could create a link, what graphics I could use, how I could archive material and how I could add “grow my contacts”. I would come home each day from the beach and got on the computer to try different fonts and new images, practice on how to edit a ‘box’, add a video link or an ‘anchor’, etc.

As the summer unfolded, *Constant Contact* suggested I create a new website for the shul, specifically for the newsletter. This would allow me to keep the

newsletter concise and allow me to keep material constantly in the hands of congregants. The website “metastasized” and began to include videos, pictures, sermons. The website would soon also include a Facebook page.

Obsessive.

On the day before our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Marilyn issued her ultimatum: if I wanted to celebrate our 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I had better not call or text my new friend “Mike from *Constant Contact*” or work on the newsletter, website, or Facebook page on our anniversary. In fact, I better not even go near my computer, my i-Pad, or my i-Phone on our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I was a good boy.

I am still obsessive with this whole synagogue social network, but I do confine my computer time to actual work time or real early in the morning!

Now, you would think after that introduction, I want to talk to you about the dangers of social networking, how we are losing our physical connectedness with each other because of our need to “stay connected”. You may be thinking that this sermon is a cautionary tale about the need to go back to basics on communal relationships. How as we begin a new year, we need to learn to put down our cell phones, stop texting, e-mailing, updating our Facebook status and return to real human interaction.

Absolutely not.

I think this ability to communicate is fantastic. As a congregation, this new way to keep congregants informed about what is happening, members from out of town aware that we remain a vibrant community, and bring new people to our shul is priceless. We now have a whole cyber network of people who remain a part of B'nai Jacob, and this social networking offers us another way to position ourselves well for the future.

So, no. I love social networking, especially for our synagogue. But I do want to talk to you about one aspect of our new social networking that has absolutely failed: Twitter. I have tweeted over 200 times for our twitter account (Charlestonshul).

We have a total of just fourteen followers. Three are members of B'nai Jacob, three are companies who 'follow' everyone, and I have literally no clue who the other eight are. Of the three who are members, two just have accounts but never even check them.

For those of you who don't know, Twitter is an online social networking that allows people to send (Tweet) and forward to others (re-Tweet) text posts of up to 140 characters. It is the text messaging of the internet. 200 million people use it, tweeting over 200 million times a day!

We have 14 followers.

**Nobody** follows Charlestonskul on Twitter.

Now, part of me doesn't care because our Facebook page is doing great (122 fans). So is our webpage (we average 200-300 visitors a day). And our newsletter that started it all is back to over 300 addresses.

But I want more followers on Twitter. Tweets are Jewish. Twitter, as a recent article in Tablet magazine noted is fundamentally Jewish. The rabbis of our past always spoke it short simple "Tweets". Remember Hillel's famous saying: "What is hateful unto you, do not do unto your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, all the rest is study. Now, go and study". A perfect tweet: just 127 characters. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And If not now, when"- 120 characters. "Say little and do much"- Just 23 characters.

Tweeting is very Jewish. Unlike rabbis of today who ramble on in sermons, the rabbis of old gave us what life is all about using the simplest of "tweets". You can teach a lot about life in just 140 characters. And no one, no one, would have been more interesting to follow if he had a Twitter account than Akavia ben Mahalalel, a little known tanna who lived about 2000 years ago.

Akavia was somewhat of a legend, some claiming that his wisdom was so great and his fear of sin so

powerful that the gates of the Temple were *never* closed to him. Yet, Akavia was so controversial that he was excommunicated by his colleagues for refusing to renounce some of his divergent opinions. He was, at one time up, for consideration as head of the Sanhedrin but removed his name from consideration remarking that he would rather be called a “fool all my lifetime than a sinner for one moment.”

Like I said, I would have loved to have followed this man on Twitter. Akavia had things to say!

And one of his “tweets” that I would re-tweeted to everyone was his famous motto for life, a way of living I would like to strive for this new year. I am hard pressed to come up with anything more profound and more inspiring than his words:

*“Know where you came from, know where you are going, and know before whom you will be asked to render an account for your actions.” (From Ethics of the Fathers 3:1)*

127 Characters.

Best. Tweet. Ever.

If I could re-tweet that, I would do that for all fourteen of our followers on Twitter, but I guess I better share it with you. What a life we all would lead with such a tweet.

*Know where you came from.*

That works on so many different levels but let me personalize it. Those words remind me of why after 25 years, I am very grateful to G-d for being here. I know where I came from. Back in 1986, I remember how woefully unprepared I was for a pulpit. I am serious. I didn't have any experience, nor did I feel confident in my abilities as to what a rabbi is supposed to do. I have never forgotten how patient, supportive, and generous this congregation was to me.

And there were many times, years later, a larger synagogue was open and I had a chance to move on to a bigger community. I never gave it a thought! My only thought was how supportive you all have been, from keeping the daily services (minyanim) going every day to coming out to events no matter how "out there" they might have been. I remembered all the encouragement, kindness, friendship, and support. Another synagogue never interested me because I knew where I came from and I knew how I got to where I was.

And you know, keeping that in mind has really turned out for the best for me and Marilyn. And I hope for you, as well.

*Know where you came from.* What a great motto to live by. If you grew up poor and have made it, remember how hard it was and open your wallet to those less fortunate. If you grew up well off, remember that when

you see someone struggling. Open your heart, realizing that not everyone had the opportunities you have had.

*Know where you came from.*

*Know where you are going.*

Tomorrow at Yizkor (memorial services), everyone will become acutely aware of what Akavia meant by this. Know that the grave that looms on the horizon. Rabbi Akavia is offering us the most positive outlook on life. As a person who loves and braces life, knowing where you are going is the most wonderful idea one could have ever be asked to keep in mind. Thank G-d we are aware of our mortality. Thank G-d we know life ends because it forces us to realize that we have things to do, people to be with, life to live. If every waking moment, we can realize and meditate on where we are going, if every moment we pause and remember that the grave lies ahead, we are going to love a little harder, touch a little more passionately and hug a little more enthusiastically. We are not going to worry about things as much. We are not going to be bothered by the silly pettiness of life and we sure as hell ain't going to hold any grudges.

We become aware, truly aware, of the preciousness of life only when we know where we are going.

Steve Jobs, of blessed memory. What he accomplished in just 56 years of life! One of the most successful entrepreneurs of our generation. Put up for



adoption. A college drop out. Slept on friends' floors. Returned coke bottles for 5 cent deposits.

The founder of Apple and Pixar Studios CEO.

Listen to his commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005 and tell me he is not “channeling” Akavia:

*Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.*

*Know where you are going.*

Remember Adam and Eve? What's that story about? Sinning? Disobeying G-d? Go back and read it again, probably for the first time since the 5<sup>th</sup> grade (You **are** smarter than a fifth grader!) Crack open some of our rabbinical commentators and you'll discover that the story is about the human condition. G-d is teaching us through Adam and Eve that we have a choice. Live forever in a Garden of Eden, blissfully ignorant of everything or eat from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”- knowledge of **everything**, life and death. Adam and Eve

were given a choice and they couldn't wait to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The lesson of that story is not one of betrayal but rather that we were not created to live in a Garden of Eden. We were meant to experience life intensely, toil by the sweat of our brow and give birth and rear children, as difficult and as physically and emotionally painful as that may be. We are to make life meaningful, make it glorious. And that is a gift that can only be appreciated when you eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, when you have awareness of life and death and when you are aware of where you are going.

And finally, Rabbi Akaviah ends his tweet with:

*Know before whom you will make a reckoning.*

Oh, has religion so messed up that idea! People make "Judgment Day" sound like a bad thing. Like appearing before the Judge of all Judges, the King of all Kings is a frightening concept. You better repent!

I respectfully disagree. We human beings want to be accountable. We want to be judged and we want to know that what we have done counts.

Part of us yearns to live in the presence of G-d, not just for the comfort He provides but for the challenge. We want to be challenged by a G-d who commands us to be moral, ethical, and righteous. In a dangerous and often

painful world, knowing there is a G-d who cares about us, who wants us to succeed, who watches what we do is the ultimate comfort. Our lives matter.

Know before whom you will one day make an accounting means that I will have to appear before the Creator of this universe and be asked if my life mattered, if what I did changed the world for the better. That is awesome! I am somebody in the eyes of G-d! I want to know my life mattered. I want to know *I* mattered. That is not frightening; that is challenging.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *“Who Needs G-d”*, quotes a Unitarian minister, G. Peter Fleck. Fleck recalls seeing a TV drama in which a man dies and finds himself standing in line, addressed by a bored usher who tells him he can choose either door, the one on the right leading to Heaven, the one on the left leading to Hell.

“You mean I can choose either one?” the man asks. “There is no judgment, no taking account of how I live?”

“That’s right,” the usher says. “Now move along, people are dying and lining up behind you. Choose one and keep the line moving.”

“But I want to confess, I want to come clean, I want to be judged.”

“We don’t have time for that. Just choose a door and move along.”

“The man chooses to walk through the door on the left, leading to Hell.

Fleck’s point is that in the end, we want to be held accountable. We want to be judged and ultimately, we want to be forgiven. We want to know that what we did in this world mattered.

*Know before whom you will one day make a reckoning.*

I understand those who are frightened by social networking. But to receive a tweet from rabbis of old who spoke in short tweets would be daily reminders that we could keep in mind through the day and throughout our lives. If that part of our new B’nai Jacob social network ever gets off the ground, words from people like Akavia would be the type of tweets you would get from me. We need to remember as we begin a new year:

*“Know where you came from, know where you are going, and know before whom you will be asked to make a reckoning.”*

May that ‘tweet’ guide our lives as we begin a new year.

Amen