

Many years ago I earned an undergraduate degree in statistics, and also in management information systems – computer programming. I have also become fascinated with learning about neuroscience research and ethics. And of course, Torah, Talmud, and basically 3000 years of Jewish texts.

We are living in a time in which many of us grew up with radio, b&w television, corded telephones...and saw the slide rule transition to hand-held calculators, and computers that took up floors in buildings to the things in our hands and on our wrists.

It has gone so fast, really. And we've had very little to say about it. And, it was and still is, kinda cool. My first *wow, this is cool* moment happened when I was working in the engineering department at UCLA. I was a math major, and had a job right there on campus, very convenient. I did some work on the side, too. That side work involved typing theses for a few engineering doctoral students, ...and my wow moment came when a message popped up on my computer screen, from one of the doctoral students who wanted to chat with me on the formatting of his thesis. It was cool – I was sitting in one place, and he was three floors below. We could chat instantly - I could verify spelling or formatting of some aspect of his thesis, or just ask how he was doing. We were only limited by how fast we could type. I learned that *he* could chat like that with colleagues and professors at other universities, like Stanford, and UCSB. Wow.

After college, I began working as a systems analyst and computer software engineer...it was pretty simple then. We analyzed what the customer's data input was, and what was needed in terms of information output – reports, charts, invoices, bookkeeping, those types of things. That was a few decades ago.

Then something happened.

Remember the movie, "You've Got Mail"? It was cute, innocent. Even then, though I didn't know it, we got, and still do, little hits of dopamine, our inner biological reward system, that reinforces these interactions, and we're hooked. I was hooked the moment the prompt came up that someone three floors below in the UCLA engineering building wanted to chat with me. It was cool.

And then online conversations became semi-public, and some public.

And then came the monetization. Advertising showed up. Computer processing became faster. Way faster. And, smaller, accessible, no longer requiring a desk computer or laptop. And cool. We have the world at our fingertips. We now can order something online, and it arrives in a day or maybe two. We can “google” or “Wikipedia” things – gone are our collections of Encyclopedia Britannica. More information than you ever could want to know is on the internet, at our fingertips, in our phones. And, so are *we*, our habits, our purchases, our names. How many of you have “googled” your own name? Surprising what the world can find out about us.

And it’s way larger than that. A few years ago, I was looking at a home basketball game, and even though Ken has a whole different account, advertisements started showing up for different models of this game on his computer. We had both been to a friends home and admired their game, and I was curious about what they cost. It turns out that Ken, seeing it pop up on his computer, bought it, and we still have it. It was a little bit cute, convenient, but bordering on a little bit creepy, that the internet would know to market this to us.

And it’s way larger than that. Our social media has been mined to learn who we are, to group us, to influence us, to separate us, and to fear one another. If you don’t know who Christopher Wylie is, you should. He’s the 29 year old former research director at Cambridge Analytica, and whistleblower, he revealed how Cambridge Analytica exploited Facebook data harvested from over 50 million people across the world to profile and target, and used the data to develop new forms of psychographic microtargeting. **Psychographics** is a qualitative methodology used to describe consumers on psychological attributes, and has been applied to the study of personality, values, opinions, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles. **Microtargeting** includes direct marketing datamining techniques that involve predictive market segmentation. It’s kind of like figuring out that we were interested in a basketball game and sending us advertisements at the sides of our internet pages when we go on the internet for something else. And then take that idea and apply it to anything and everything. Our news, friends, politics, and those messages that say directly or indirectly: “if you like this, then you want to see that, or learn about this too...” But until recently it has been happening largely without our permission or even awareness.

Why do I bring this up, here, now? Because it's really important to know that we can bring our rich legacy of Jewish thinking and values to our lives here – to ask questions, to ask, is what I am seeing and hearing really true, is this valid, is this morally and ethically correct? Is there another perspective to this? We must not become overwhelmed at this – rather, let us become keen and responsive. To check information out, not to become inundated with information without verifying it. We need to be just a tad skeptical. Or a lot skeptical. We have to give ourselves permission to limit the bombardment of information coming our way. Why? Because the message, if you're interested in this...you should be interested in that...has the capability to manipulate us. And divide us. We feel safer when we stay on our side, in our comfort zone, with the familiar. Technology has gone from a cool tool to something that influences us and can manipulate us. Instead of using technology, where it is a tool, a resource, we have become the resource, the source of data, we are marketing targets, and even microtargeting. Immersed in this world, in a world which has been developing without interest in ethics as an essential component of programming technology, missing that ethical component, we risk becoming "thing-ed". Rather than being human beings, we are resources.

There are specific actions we can do, that are aligned with our Jewish values, and I'm going to name three:

One: Recognize the miracle of human beings. Relationships. Martin Buber described true meaningful human interactions as "I-Thou" moments – yes, lasting just moments, but important moments – where human beings are not "things" out there, but are rather human beings endowed with a spark of the divine. I-Thou moments are the recognition of the holiness in those we speak with and interact with.

Our Torah, in our reading this week, Kedoshim, You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God am holy... You shall love your neighbor as yourself... love the stranger as yourself, for you were once the stranger in the land of Egypt." Let us not be strangers. Let us recognize the miracle of relationships, of being human.

Two: Look at the world with wonder and awe. This enables us to wonder and question as well as to admire, and enables us to balance skepticism with beauty, gratitude and

peace. These are but a few qualities that are examined in mussar and kabbalah, a topic connected to the counting of the omer that I spoke on two weeks ago.

Three: Listen. We need to listen to one another. Neuroscience research has revealed that as we age our ability increases, to watch our inner processes, our inner thinking, and to increase our compassion and to place ourselves in others' shoes. And from that recognition and awareness, we can further hone ourselves to move toward the sacred art of listening and being present to and for others.

We have a lot of work to do in this world, in healing ourselves, our country, our world, our environment. As long as we are silo-ed and separated, and not speaking to those who seem so different, we are severely limited in our ability to focus on the problems and challenges that exist in reality.

Over the next week, I invite you to engage in the three actions: one, to recognize the miracle of relationships – notice your I-Thou moments. Second, look at the world with wonder and awe, and third, really listen to someone – I mean, really listen to them. How? - Imagine seeing the world, their opinions, concerns, and values through their eyes, through their perspective.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches: “The essence of peace is to join together two opposites. Do not be alarmed if you see someone whose way of thinking is completely opposite your own, so that you imagine that it is absolutely impossible that the two of you should ever be at peace. On the contrary. That is the essence of the wholeness of peace; to find peace between two opposites, just as God makes peace above between fire and water which are two opposites.”

So this week, let us seek to recognize the miracle of relationships, of I-Thou moments; look at the world with wonder and awe; and practice the sacred art of listening. Let us listen to people, to nature, birds, even silence.

In this way, may we be blessed with grace, peace, and may we **be** a blessing.

Shabbat shalom!