



Technology in Temple: Spirituality in 140 Characters or Fewer

I am with my congregants on a Jewish study tour of Morocco following "the footsteps of Maimonides." There in the old city of Fes is the Kairaouine Mosque, constructed in 857 C.E. and connected to what might be the oldest ongoing university in the world. Maimonides was a student there. In some ways, the city hasn't changed since his time. Donkeys still carry heavy loads of fabric on their backs through the narrow ancient streets just the way they did when he lived here. But when you peer into the mosque, you can see the same poster that you see as you enter our synagogue: a picture of a cell phone with a line drawn through it. In the mosque, the Arabic words on the sign can be roughly translated as: "Please turn off your cell phones. Talk to God instead."

Some things never seem to change and are common the world over. People still gather for prayer. Imams, priests and rabbis give sermons. We want people to pay attention. How do we help people pay attention?

Sometimes we take risks, do something that might even be slightly transgressive. Consider for example these recent High Holy Days in our congregation, Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, a large, almost 75-year-old Reform congregation in the middle of Beverly Hills. The opening words of my Rosh Hashana sermon, as I took my cell phone out of the pocket of my white robe, were: "Please do not turn off your cell phone."

There was stunned silence, then nervous laughter. "Yes, you heard me. Please do not turn off your cell phones. In fact, please take them out now. And if you have a Facebook or Twitter account, please log on."

The theme of all of our High Holy Day messages related to the existential question posed by God to the prophet Elijah in the Book of Judges: "What are you doing here?" "What are you doing here," we asked our congregants. "What are you doing here in the synagogue and here at this very moment in your life?"

So I gave the congregation an assignment right there in synagogue: "Please post your answer to the question 'What are you doing here?' in 140 characters or less."

In 140 characters. Characters, not words.

Many of them did, and the answers, because they were so short perhaps, were especially moving.

"I am in Temple Emanuel for Rosh Hashanah services sitting next to my adult children thinking about my own parents." (111 characters.)

"I am letting beautiful music wash over me and feeling a connection with Jews around the world." (91 characters)

"I am thinking about last year... not an easy year... financial challenges, health scares...I'm hoping this year will be better." (117 characters)

"I am looking for balance in my life. (36 characters.)

"I am trying to connect my soul to something deeper than just myself." (68 characters.)

Existential questions probably don't change. But the ways we challenge people to think about them do change over time. And new technology gives us new tools.

My colleague Rabbi Jonathan Aaron also took risks with technology for one of his sermons. He used a PowerPoint presentation to encourage people to think about what it means to be "here." It opened with an image of the chairs in our sanctuary, and then of the sanctuary building. Then the picture expanded to the city of Beverly Hills, then to the state of California. In each subsequent image the camera zoomed further and further away until eventually we saw the picture of the universe from the Hubble space craft.

It was as though we were seeing the universe through God's eyes, as it were. Suddenly everything looked different, including our own personal dramas that often keep us stuck in constricted places and keep us from seeing the bigger picture.

The Biblical story describes how Elijah discovered that bigger perspective not in an earthquake and not in a fire, but rather in a still small voice. Our congregation got a glimpse of it through PowerPoint, Facebook and Twitter.

The important questions never change. But new technology can help us pay attention -- and respond -- in different ways.