

It is Not in Heaven: Handling Problems Where You Are
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Rabbi David Jay Kaufman

Today, virtually everyone has a cell phone. Teens seem to be on their phones almost all the time, often when they should not be. In the old days, cell phones were few and far between among teenagers. Now, they are practically part of their hands. They take their phones everywhere, talking and texting almost constantly.

Parents who would hover over them if they were in the room, now continue to hover when they leave their presence through regular and sometimes frequent cell phone contact. Some of these parents expect to be able to continue this relationship even when their children leave town and even when they are away at camp for a month or two.

In the past couple of years, I have heard numerous stories from colleagues about students who smuggled cell phones into programs where they were banned. Certainly no few of these students do so to keep in contact with a boyfriend or girlfriend, some just because they are teens who are rebelling against authority, but more than a few do it because their parents ASK them to do it.

I know of several instances of the behavior that I am about to describe to you. It is not a description of any one in particular.

A fifteen year old goes away to a program where he or she is told that cell phones are not permitted to students at all, under any circumstances. His or her parents do not understand this restriction, feeling like it must only apply to people who would abuse the use of the cell phones, and therefore tell their child or even ask their child to bring the phone to the program where they hope to communicate regularly with their child.

The child, now maintaining a deception for his or her parents, in turn sneaks off to use the phone where and when staff members cannot see the violation of policy and where no one could overhear the content of the conversation.

Then, the child exhibits difficulty handling problems during the program. His or her counselors or supervisors do not know what is troubling the student, because problems have not been shared with them. They only know that the child is troubled.

Finally the cell phone is discovered. The parents are called.

Often the parents are angry at the staff, despite the fact that the staff made clear that this was a violation of policy from the start and have every right to be angry themselves that rules were wantonly violated and even more so when the parents defend the violation. "I gave him or her permission to bring the cell phone. My child needs to talk with me. He or she has been having problems, like we knew he or she would, and I've been trying to help her or him out. My child needs the phone to contact me."

The parents think that by maintaining the connection at long distance, they can help to solve problems that might arise and, in several cases of which I know personally from my Summers at Goldman Union Camp Institute, at NFTY Institute, and at other youth group programs, were actively trying to do so.

One program director had a rather profound conversation with a parent of which I will attempt to do justice. We'll call her Mrs. Berg and for simplicity's sake, we'll make the child a girl.

"Mrs. Berg, I'm calling you because we found your daughter in possession of a cell phone. She tells us that she brought it

with your permission and that she has been in contact with you on it during her time here."

"Yes, my husband and I told her to bring it. We were all afraid that she would have trouble there, being away from us. And we were right, she's had trouble. She's told us all about it and we've been trying to help. You aren't helping her."

"I understand. And have you been able to help her solve her problems?"

"No. We're not there. It's not possible over the phone."

"That is one of the major reasons why we do not allow kids to bring cell phones with them. They need to share their problems with us and we, who are here with them, can help them to solve their problems as long as we know what they are."

This specific response reminded me of the story of the Oven of Akhni in the Talmud. The Talmud mentions the case of some particular type of oven and describes the events that occurred during a debate among the Rabbis over its ritual status. The majority of the sages held the oven was not kosher, while Rabbi Eliezer maintained that it was acceptable. The Talmud tells us that:

Rabbi Eliezer brought all the proofs in the world to try to prove his point, but they were not accepted. Finally, he said,

"If the law should follow me, let this carob tree prove it!" And the tree was uprooted from where it was and thrown 100 cubits away (some people say 400 cubits). They answered, "We don't bring proofs from carob trees."

"OK, then if the law is according to me, let the aqueduct prove it!" And the water in the aqueduct started flowing uphill. "We don't bring proofs from aqueducts."

"If I'm right, let the walls of this house of study prove it!" And the walls started shaking, as if to fall down.

Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked the walls: "You keep out of this! This is a debate among scholars, and no concern of yours!" So the walls didn't fall, out of respect to him, but they didn't stand up straight either, out of respect to Rabbi Eliezer, so they remained sort of leaning.

"If I'm right, let it be proven from Heaven!" And at that, a Bat Kol, a Heavenly Voice, responded, "Why are you arguing with Rabbi Eliezer? He is correct! He's right in everything he says! The law should follow him!"

Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and replied, "It is not in heaven!"

It is said that Rabbi Natan visited with Elijah the prophet, in Heaven, and asked him what God did when all this was going on. Elijah answered that God smiled and said "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me."

One could imagine someone saying to the rabbis, "but what if God were to tell you that you are wrong in your interpretation of the law?" With the response, "God gave us the law to interpret." The Talmudic story teaches us that we are now in possession of the Torah and more specifically, that the rabbis make decisions based upon majority rule. That is the essence of the story.

In the broader sense, however, the story is also a paradigm for parenting—with God as parent and the Torah as the child sent out into the world after being raised.

Now, I will not, for a moment, tell you that sending a child to camp or to a youth retreat is the same as sending your child into the world after college, but it is similar.

I could delve further into the comparison and talk about the fact that many parents feel that they should be able to continue to control the lives of their children long after they have left college.

Then again, no few of you have children who left home and returned. That situation is certainly not a parallel to the story from the Talmud. The Torah did not go back home to stay with God while figuring out what path to choose in life, and making sure that God did their laundry... But the story does give us advice on how problems should be resolved.

Here is the moral of this story:

You need to deal with real people—who are there where you are, where the problem is, and not to rely on disembodied voices. A phone call or a Bat Kol can't solve life's problems. Solutions are made where you are.

Yes, a bit of advice, a bit of sage wisdom from a distance may help, but often not. Yes, doctors may be able to guess what ails you over phone based upon your answers, but you may not be telling them the information vital for the doctor to make the right decision. You may not know the right answers. Your perception may be off. This is why actually going to the doctor's office is invaluable.

We have abandoned far too much to the idea that technology makes distance irrelevant. When you decide that a phone call from a loved one is as good as a hug, tell me that I am wrong.

"It is not in heaven," but instead here with us. This is a theme of Yom Kippur as well. These words are in fact contained in tomorrow's Torah portion.

We will read the passage from Deuteronomy (30:11-14):

11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

The task of *teshuvah*, changing our direction and returning to the proper path, may not be easy for us, but it is within our grasp. The work of repentance, and it is work, may not be as easy as saying "I'm sorry," but neither is it impossible. We know our faults and can recall times that we have hurt or offended. We know how to make amends and to do better the next time. We also know that isolating ourselves in order to avoid emotions does not lead to resolution and healing.

There is a growing tendency in our society to share joys and pains with unknowns or distant friends in cyberspace, on the internet, rather than sharing them with those around us. It is not infrequent that I will learn of simchas or tsuris, happy events or troubles, by email or even through a simple status posting on Facebook.

"Just had baby."

"Jane Doe is now in a relationship."

"John Smith (who you know to be married) changed his status to single."

"Jim is having surgery on Monday."

"Grandmother died last night."

Needless to say, these statements hardly relay the emotional content of the authors.

One cannot make atonement this way, though we may try. We may try to come before God and say in the style of Facebook:

"Decided I was wrong."

"Jane Doe is now in a relationship with God."

"Jane Doe changed her status to 'free of sin.'"

It doesn't work like that. We have to invest our emotions and share our thoughts... Even to convince ourselves that we are sincere, we have to put forth an effort, perhaps even to shed a tear or two or a few.

And Tradition tells us that we do not need to press send for our message to reach God, to reach into the heavens. Today, God descends unto us, to make it easier for us. Atonement is within reach if we wish it and if we try to achieve it.

I didn't say it would be easy. I say only that it is possible. It is within reach. To quote the Torah, "It is in your mouth and in your heart."

"It is not in heaven."

Neither is the ability to make our community better, to strengthen our relationships with one another, and to build our spiritual lives. These tasks are up to us and they require that we physically take part in the life of the community. We have to be there for each other. We have to be here for each other.

When someone suffering illness or feeling the pain of the loss of a loved one enters these doors, they do not want to hear a Bat Kol. They want to see your face, feel your

embrace of love and caring, and to hear your words of consolation and hope face to face.

You cannot do the job through email or over the phone. And if you are not here, even if they should hear a Bat Kol, the very voice of God speaking to them through prayer and song, it will not be as powerful, as spiritually and emotionally uplifting, as it would be if you were at their side.

"It is not in heaven."

It is up to you—your congregation, your community, your circle of friends. Your relationship with God and Jewish tradition depend upon your investment, your commitment of your time and your energy. In the long run, it really does not matter what follows the words, "I could not be there for you because..."

And you never know just when that might be, which Friday night, which Shabbat morning, your friend in need will enter those doors and hope to see you. That is what a congregation is all about, being there for one another.

"It is not in heaven."

Take the opportunity that the High Holidays bring to repair wrongs, to bring resolution and healing where there is pain, to begin anew. It is up to you.

May you be sealed in the Book of Life for a good and happy year.

Shanah tovah u'metukah!