

Rosh Hashana remarks 2010

My name is Matt Bernstein, and my family and I have been members of Kahal B'raira since 2003. We have considered ourselves fortunate to have found a community so rich in the spirit of welcoming, questioning, and affirming. It is my honor to share my remarks for the new year with you this evening.

I've found that the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services – besides their obvious differences – do share a key element in common: the theme of reflection. At this time, we look at how we've done things in the past year, and how we might do them differently in the year to come. As for me, I've been giving a lot of thought to how technology is changing how we do things, and I'd like to share some of those thoughts with you.

A little while ago, you were asked to turn off your cellphones and other devices. This has become customary for certain gatherings – movies and live performances, weddings and funerals, and services such as the one we're sharing now. Invariably, this polite request does not succeed in quelling such devices. Some people may forget they leave them on. Others – I'm thinking of moviegoers here -- perhaps think that the glow of the cellphone screens will disappear, unnoticed, into the fabric of the darkened theater. Still others may very well panic at the thought of shutting them off. The intrusion of these devices has become the new normal.

But to me, it doesn't feel normal. While I am not by any stretch a first adopter, neither am I a Luddite. Yet at the age of 49, I do find myself straddling two worlds uncomfortably – the world of the technological past, which holds not just childhood memories of languorous days I spent drawing or going for cicada-serenaded walks in the country but more recent memories of a way of life that just seemed happily simpler, and the world of the technological present, which holds a panoply of high-tech tools – tools for connection, tools for research, and yes, tools for virtual farming with animated livestock.

The present doesn't even seem like the present anymore – it seems like the ever-onrushing future all the time.

I don't mean to throw a blanket over progress and change. They are inevitable. Indeed, when I refer to high-tech devices as tools, I don't use that reference to

utility loosely. I embrace many of the methods of the age we live in – both in my personal life through the instant connections I can make in the search for information, and in my professional life, where the newspaper for which I work is trying to rise to the challenges of the age. Unlike Prince, I do not think the Internet is over. Rather, I believe there is no turning back.

And so, I often ponder what essential stuff we can still claim to have in common with previous generations in the midst of these ever-hastening changes. I fear that we could lose our way in this world without a firm grip on that essential stuff – that stuff that I would define as: that which makes us human.

We live in an era in which we are furiously redefining what it means to connect – to be connected with others, and indeed, to be connected with ourselves and with the world around us.

Yet here we are – devices turned off (right?) – and why are we here this evening? Among many reasons, we are here to gather as one –to connect, and to reflect.

What does it mean to connect?

I believe it means, more than ever, the act of looking up. I don't mean that figuratively. What I've found about the new tools of technology – in my commutes on the T, along my spectacular running paths along Boston Harbor, and even during special gatherings of extended families who have been separated by miles and, sometimes, years – is that these devices compel us to look down. This concerns me. Because I believe we miss a lot when we're looking down. While these tools give us avenues to connect at lightning speeds, we can also find ourselves distracted from immediate concerns (or immediate pleasures, or whimsies), distracted by the pull of the tangential text message or phone call.

We've heard – often from people when they're exasperated – that one can't be in two places at once. Well, now, in a way, people can be in more than two places at once, and the exponent grows.

While the ability to reach out and be reached in this way is undeniably convenient, even sometimes urgently desired – think of those separated family members when they are apart – I think there is much we can do to control this technology so that it doesn't control us. I've seen public service announcements on television warning us about the dangers of distracted driving. I'm warning about the dangers of distracted living.

There was a recent New Yorker cartoon, with two guys at a bar, and one says to the other: "I used to call people, then I got into e-mailing, then texting, and now I just ignore everyone." Ignoring everyone is one option, but it's not a good one. Nevertheless, given the flood of data we're receiving, it's easy to feel as if we're just treading water, and as if the only way to cope is to swat away at once all the e-mails and other messages. When I first registered on Facebook, I was thrilled by the long-lost names and faces who reemerged into my life. But now I find it peculiar that, while I can monitor the activities, if only in passing, of people I once knew only remotely in high school, I routinely go a week or more between calling my mother in North Carolina to see how she's doing. So, while I LOL'd, as they say, at the New Yorker cartoon, it made me think that, just as our computers come with text filters, we need filters too. Our online detours can be quick and fun, but not always so deep and meaningful.

I have an equilibrium theory about life. I believe that we seek a balance, and although we can swing wildly away from that point of perfect balance, we ultimately need to plot a course to a midpoint. So, as with everything, I'm looking for a balance. Where emoticons wink in a virtual sphere, I want to remind myself that I move in a terrestrial sphere, surrounded by trees, people, highways. Where a phone in my pocket keeps me in touch, I want to stop and consider that – short of an emergency – whatever beckons on that call can wait.

This past summer, my wife Jayne and my son Jake and I spent a week at Acadia National Park, a true paradise that we like to return to every couple of years. Before we left, we considered whether we would bring Jake's laptop with us. We knew it would come in handy for looking up information, and we were well aware of how it had become almost an appendage for Jake. But he was the first to say, without hesitation, "Let's leave it at home."

Then again, we knew that the house we had rented had a television and a DVD player. We didn't expect to spend any time at all channel surfing, but who knows – it could rain. So we brought the last disc of "Lost," season 4. Our first night there, after a long drive north, we thought we'd relax and watch an episode. But we couldn't get the DVD player to work, and we all became ridiculously frustrated. I left a message for the owners of the house, and, while I stressed to them that it was by no means an emergency, I asked for advice.

The next morning, after a good night's sleep in a beautiful place under the whirring of ceiling fans, I took a moment and quietly figured out how to get the

machine to work before anyone else was up. But I kept that little success to myself. After all, as John Wayne once said: We were burning daylight. A few hours later, we were hiking atop Beech Cliffs, whose panorama overlooked Echo Lake and the ocean beyond. My cellphone rang. I had forgotten I was carrying it. But on the other end of the phone, there was one of the house's owners, getting back to me. I felt extraordinarily foolish, told him that I had figured out the electronics problem, thanked him for getting back to me, and then he and I laughed when I told him where we were, standing on one of Acadia's most scenic peaks. Then I turned my cellphone off.

A couple days later, the cellphone did come to good use – as an alarm clock, at around 3:30 a.m. That's when we determined we'd need to wake up to drive up to the top of Cadillac Mountain – one of the highest peaks on the East Coast – to watch the sunrise. This is something Jayne and I have wanted to do for years, but we always valued our sleep too much. The three of us stepped quietly into the car, crept onto the road in the pre-dawn light, and made our way to the stunning switchback roadway that leads to the peak. There we became instant members of a small but vibrant community of fellow adventurers who wanted a glimpse of something spectacular, something that required a detour from the usual in order to behold, something that had to be experienced in its natural glory. There we found connection and, at the same time, a great sort of shared privacy.

And as that fiery orange disc dramatically rose on the horizon, I was alone with my thoughts, surrounded by fellow witnesses to a miracle that happens every day.

More recently, while riding the T to work, I noticed a gentleman to my left reading a photocopy of some magazine or journal I didn't recognize. But what jumped out at me was the headline of the article he was reading: "A 19th Century Manual for Exploring Unknown Regions." I have no idea what this article was about, or whether the headline was meant to be ironic, but I couldn't help but smile at the mystery and the promise suggested in those words. Because here in the 21st century, it's still not too late to discover that the unknown regions are not just the ones we haven't traveled to visit, but the places within us and the places within those we love and those whom we have not yet met.

As for the "manual" referred to in the headline, what if that manual were, not a list of frequently asked questions with automated answers, but a question we

hadn't thought to ask. It's not too late to remind ourselves that you don't need Google to search for something or, for that matter, to find it.

Thank you.