



Yom Kippur 2010

“REPUTATION BANKRUPTCY” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

In thinking about my remarks for this morning, I discovered a typically zany performance by Jerry Lewis of a song written in 1950 by Leon Pober. The song is called “I’m a Little Busybody” and it takes off at a frenetic pace. I will slow it down for you.

I’m a little busybody though I know it’s very shoddy, I insist on knowing what is going on with everybody. Cause I’m such a busy body, always prying always spying, I’m defying anyone to try to hide the fact from me.

The song ends with the line. “And that is how the gossip goes / and all because I stick my nose / in other peoples’ dirty clothes.”

Now gossip, of course, can be quite harmful and is not condoned, nor is it uniquely a Jewish issue or pastime, and yet we do have an honored place in our cultural heritage for the role, popularized in Fiddler on the Roof, of the local yenta or busybody who carried the news from one person to another of everyone’s comings and goings.

But this is becoming a moot issue today. There is no longer any need for yentas to deliver the news. These days, thanks to the virtual shtetl known as Facebook, we self-disclose our own comings and goings. In brief and not so brief sound bites, from deep and philosophical to the banal trivialities of our lives, we share all sorts of random comments and we keep up with each other.

Whether or not you are among the 500 million of us who have our own account, it is the even rarer person who has not read about the proliferation of this social network that is undoubtedly expanding even as we sit here and, need I point out, with no help from its City Congregation members who may or may not be fasting, but have removed themselves from their Facebook accounts for a few hours today during this gathering and may be experiencing the pangs of internet hunger.

But this will pass and they will hopefully connect up this evening and report to all their friends about what a meaningful Yom Kippur observance they had today among their fellow secular humanistic Jews. In this sense, Facebook can be a platform to spread a message, to advocate a position, or, at the very least, to tell each other about a good meal we ate or movie we just saw and recommend highly.

Facebook is about collecting friends and creating our own communities. Some of us are rank amateurs at this, or are rather passive about the whole thing. We may not want to get rejected by someone we ask to be our friend and we may prefer instead to wait to get invited to be someone else's friend. At the same time, we're also unclear about the etiquette about accepting every invitation or not. So our friend-total generally remains in the low to mid-double digits.

But others, who remind me of the popular kids in high school, evoke friend-envy in me. They assiduously cultivate connections – both new and old – and easily have many hundreds if not thousands of names in their roster. Of course, I keep wondering how well they really know all these people.

Now as you may undoubtedly know, Facebook is not without its critics. Aside from the amount of time it can suck out of your life, probably the major complaint has to do with privacy. Who gets access to what kind of information? How much do we share of ourselves and with whom? What kind of HIPPA-equivalent safeguards are there to protect confidentiality?

Since I'm one of those novice users I hadn't realized until recently that not only do I get to accumulate my own friends, I also get to see who the friends of my friends are. And then, if I feel like boring down any number of levels lower or sideways, I can see who the friends of their friends are, and on it goes until I get nothing done with my life.

The more problematic issue is that the Internet is very unforgiving and preserves, seemingly forever, all blog entries, wall postings, and indiscrete photographs from moments of youthful indiscretion, not to mention records of our political donations and real estate purchases. We have all read about employers who have gotten into an applicant's Facebook account and decided not to hire the person because of a particular posting or photograph. Even the innocent expressions of teens to their peers can be damaging and embarrassing when they reflect poorly on their parents.

These days, our private lives are more and more an open book. People routinely google up new people they meet. We can go to Date Check and investigate people we're thinking about dating to see if they have a criminal record, which they may not own up to on a first date. We can do the same with babysitters. I also learned that lawyers and their consultants are now trolling Facebook to see if they can get an edge on who to accept or knock off a potential jury.

One response, at least to the Facebook situation, is a new social-networking site in development that won't compel users to compromise their privacy. I have no clue how this works technologically and if it could possibly be the successful David to Facebook's Goliath, but the site has an intriguing name: Diaspora. It suggests that it is a place to flee to and survive away from the repressive Facebook homeland.

Another proposal that addresses those youthful indiscretions and missteps comes from Professor Jonathan Zittrain, who teaches cyberlaw at Harvard, a field the Talmudic rabbis of old never could have imagined but undoubtedly would have been good at. Professor Zittrain promotes an idea that he calls "reputation bankruptcy" which essentially allows people to wipe their reputation slates clean and start over.

This is, of course, a very Jewish concept, and fitting for Yom Kippur. Our task is to bring about this kind of self-cleansing. We may not be able to wipe the slate clean in the virtual world of the Internet, but the real challenge is to wipe it clean internally.

But this is easier said than done and upon reflection I'm not sure if it is really a surmountable task. There are things I have done that I have regretted and I can't undo. There are things I've said that I can't take back. There are decisions I've made and roads I've traveled down that I wish I could do over again. And when I remember these moments – and not because I call them to mind voluntarily – but because they force themselves on me – I feel anguish or shame or sadness that I didn't manage it differently.

I read the quip that “the limits of human memory ensure that people's sins are eventually forgotten.” Having turned fifty some years ago, there is some truth to this maxim but it seems that some things we forget and others we wish we could.

In this respect, Yom Kippur may not entirely be about cleansing and renewal, but also may be about acceptance. And about making a commitment to learn from our past experiences and adjust our behavior for the future.

We do get a second chance everyday to live better lives.

And, whether or not you are on Facebook, we can all become better friends.