

Parshat Shemini
Rosh Hodesh Bensching
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So by now most of you know how much I love gadgets and being up on the latest technology. So for me, being clueless about the latest new thing is a source of unease. When something new comes out – first I want to understand it and then I have to decide if I *need* it. So, you can imagine that Twitter has caused me no little bit of consternation. First of all I was having the *darndest* time figuring out what it was and to the extent that I did understand it, I couldn't for the life of me figure out why someone would *need* it. Then the New York Times came to the rescue with an article this past week titled: "Putting Twitter's World to Use."

Now for those of you over 40 who, like me, are not familiar with Twitter, lest you think I am speaking about some obscure aspect of the digital new world, the article makes it clear that 14 million users accessed Twitter 99 million times last month alone. Most of us over 40 react with confusion as to why on earth anyone would want to read a short message (you are limited to 140 or less characters) about what someone ate for breakfast. But, apparently taken collectively these messages become a surprisingly useful tool for solving problems and providing insight. Companies have started using Twitter to see what their customers are thinking. Last week in Moldova, protesters used Twitter as a rallying tool while outsiders used it to help them understand what was happening there. The article in the Times says that soon even machines will twitter as much as people. Corey Menscher (I love that name), a graduate student at NYU, developed Kickbee, an elastic band with vibration sensors that his pregnant wife wore to alert Twitter each time the baby kicked. In other words, each time the baby kicked, the bracelet sensed it, and sent a message that could be read online that said: "I kicked mommy at 8:52 PM on Friday, January 2!"

Soon experts think Twitter could be used to send home security alerts or tell doctors when a patient's blood sugar or heart rate climbs too high. At Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, surgeons and residents twittered through a recent operation to remove a brain tumor from a 47-year old man who has seizures. "A portion of the skull is being removed to allow access to the dura, the lining of the brain," an early tweet said. Medical residents and curious laymen following online asked the doctors what music they were listening to (Loreena McKennitt, a Celtic singer), whether the patient felt pain in the brain (no, just pressure) and how big the tumor was (the size of a golf ball). As is convention on Twitter, they tagged all their tweets with a keyword so anyone could search for the keyword and read the stream of posts.

"Twitter lets people know what's going on about things they care about instantly, as it happens," said Evan Williams, Twitter's chief executive and co-founder. "In the best cases, Twitter makes people smarter and faster and more efficient." Twitter reverses the notion of the group," said Paul Saffo, the Silicon Valley futurist. "Instead of creating the group you want, you send it and the group self-assembles." Now, I was beginning to understand. "Instead of creating the group you want, you send it and the group self-assembles."

Here is an example they gave in the times article: Martin Stoll was visiting New York City, and he was searching for a comedy show. So he posted a comment on Twitter and within seconds, five people he did not know had recommended shows. People who had already signed up to follow Mr. Stoll's tweets had his question delivered to their Twitter page or cell phone and others reading the live Twitter stream could also see it. So the way it works is

that you send out a message and then a group assembles around the information you send.

In other words it is kind of like the ancient observance of Rosh Hodesh that we marked today. Take that Mr. Futurist from Silicon Valley – you thought you were so cutting edge – well, if I am getting this right, Twitter is just an updated version of *Rosh Hodesh bensching*.

In fact the more I thought about it, Twitter functions the exact same way that *Rosh Hodesh bensching* does.

And you thought Rosh Hodesh was so – well yesterday when actually it was Twitter just two thousand years ahead of its time.

Earlier we recited a special prayer to announce the coming of the new moon. But exactly how we did it was uniquely Jewish and requires a few words of explanation, it is almost as complicated to understand as Twitter.

In ancient times there was no established calendar and the decision on when the holidays were to fall were made by the rabbinical court, the Sanhedrin. The Torah states, for example, that Passover is to be proclaimed on the 15th day of the month of Nisan. It was no problem to count 15 days from the first of the month. The challenge was to ascertain when the first day of the month occurred. The first day began when a new moon was visible in the sky. In order to precisely fix this moment, the rabbis invited individuals to observe the night sky and to testify before them exactly what they had seen. When enough witnesses had supplied identical descriptions of the position of the moon, the rabbis decreed that the new month had begun.

The Sanhedrin was assembled in the courtyard of the Temple in Jerusalem on the 30th of each month, from morning to evening, waiting for the reports of those who had observed the new moon. After examination of at least three reliable witnesses, the president of the Sanhedrin in the presence of at least three members, called out: “The new moon is consecrated!”, whereupon the whole assembly of people twice repeated the words: “It is consecrated.” The blowing of the shofar at the time of the proclamation was also a frequent practice.

Originally, the rabbis developed a system of announcement of the new moon to all the people scattered throughout Israel and then Babylonia as well. And this is the first case of Twittering in recorded history.

Well they didn’t know they were Twittering, and they didn’t call it Twitter – but it seems the exact same thing to me. Huge bonfires were kindled on the hills outside Jerusalem. Torches were tied together with flax. Designated sentries would light the torches and wave them back and forth on certain hilltops near Jerusalem until other Jews saw them and did the same - the message was transmitted from hilltop to hilltop. It was a beautiful sight. The whole country looked like a sea of fire from Jerusalem all the way to Babylonia the message was sent. Everyone in ancient Judea knew within a few minutes that the new month had begun. How did futurist Paul Saffo describe the process of Twittering? “Instead of first creating the group first you send the message and the group self-assembles...?” Well that is precisely what happened with these bonfires – they sent the message about the new moon and all of Israel assembled around that message.

Because the outlying communities, those that lived at a distance from Palestine did not get the message in a timely fashion. There was uncertainty about the date of the new month

and consequently the practice developed of observing two days of the major holidays, rather than the one Biblical day, in order to avoid any difficulty.

Ok, so the system wasn't perfect and they were clearly limited by the technology of their day – but fundamentally it was Twitter. A brief message, sent out, so that all who were interested in such things could act accordingly. It is kind of like Susan Boyle –you know the British singing sensation who overnight became world famous thanks to YouTube and Twitter. Like the fires announcing the ancient Rosh Hodesh – the message is passed from place to place, person to person – until very quickly everybody knows. The fixing of the new month then like Twitter today was a most significant act creating community. The observance of Jewish holidays was based on it, and it became an expression of Jewish unity as well. The rabbis jealously guarded their right to arrange the calendar and considered it a responsibility of great importance.

And we still *bench rosh hodesh* as we did today. We still recite the prayer on the Shabbat before a new moon to announce to the assembled congregation the arrival of a new moon and hence a new month. And we insisted on continuing this tradition long after it was no longer necessary. Why are we still *bensching Rosh Hodesh*? Why are we still dealing with new moons and prayers announcing the coming of a new month - get a calendar!

Why we could set up a program today that would send out an email to every Jew anywhere in the world, informing them of the coming of a new month - and we could program it for the next 2000 years and barring a computer failure or power shutdown - never have to worry about fixing another *Rosh Hodesh* ever!

But my friends - this is not news. *Rosh Hodesh benching* became obsolete long before the invention of the computer. Maybe 2000 years ago it was necessary to convene a court and hear witnesses and light bonfires - but already by the middle of the fourth century about the year 358, a great rabbi named Hillel the Second wrote down the rules for fixing the dates of the Jewish calendar - rules that have been followed for the last 1700 or so years. Even back then, rabbis who knew the rules could figure out the correct calendar for years, indeed for centuries, in advance. These rules were based on mathematical principles for determining such things a leap year and when the holidays should fall - Pesach in the spring, Sukkot in the fall. It was no longer necessary to use messages, it was no longer necessary to use witnesses and the uncertainty associated with the original forms of establishing the dates of the calendar and the new month was completely removed. I have a program on my Iphone that can calculate any Hebrew Date for any year any time in the future or in the past. I could, in a matter of seconds, tell you exactly when *Rosh Hodesh Iyar* will occur - not only for this year - but also in the year 2022! (May 2 - in case you are interested) *Rosh Hodesh Iyyar* in the year 2222? - April 13. So who needs *Rosh Hodesh benching* anymore. Why did the rabbis maintain this antiquated custom of *Rosh Hodesh Bensching*? Eliminate it and we could get out of shul about 10 minutes earlier, which means 10 minutes more kiddush time -what is the problem?

Well, first of all, we keep the prayer as a reminder, as a connection to a rich past. We keep the prayer because of the centuries of associations that have become connected to it - Centuries of magnificent cantors have created moving and inspiring renditions of this prayer - a heritage that we maintain and continue each time we recite it in the synagogue.

But, it also contains an important truth, one on which the success of Twitter is based and one which we ignore at our peril.

When it comes to community, the rule is – or at least the rule should be - message creates community and not the other way around. With both Twitter and *Rosh Hodesh* – first comes the message and then the community of interest coalesces around the message.

I believe this is a truth worth paying attention to – as I fear that too often we get things backwards. We think that you are born into a group, are a member of a group, pay dues to a group and therefore are duty bound to identify with the message and beliefs of that group when it should be the other way around. A group stands for something, has something to say, professes certain beliefs and all those who agree, all those who are prepared to affirm those beliefs identify with the group and join with it.

We tell our children we want them to have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah – we want them to proudly identify as Jews and as good children are want to do, they ask why? Why should I want to be a part of this group? Why should I want to identify with this people? Why should I want to be a Jew? And too many of us stutter and stammer unsatisfactory answers like, “Because I said so!” or “Because of the Six Million!” or “because that’s who you are!” And lo and behold we are surprised when they politely – or not so politely say: “No thanks!”

Message first – community second – that is the secret of Twitter and that is the secret of *Rosh Hodesh*. You send out a message and then a group assembles around the information you send.

And what is so ironic is that we Jews have a wonderful message around which to assemble; a message of holiness and significance. A message that helps us craft a life of purpose and sacred moments – a message of joy and celebration, of moments like Passover Seders where families rejoice together and Yom Hashoah where we cry together. A message of Bat Mitzvah where we gather to celebrate what it means to become an adult and accept responsibility for yourself and the world in which you live -- we have a message shaped by the hand of God and molded by the hands of ten thousand generations of Jews who have gone before us and made this message their own. We have a language and a people; a place and a purpose – and all we have to do is Tweet it – all we have to do is light the fires and share the message and it will shine as brightly today as it did thousands of years ago from the mountain tops of Judea.

Judaism struggles today not for want of a message but for want of messengers.

So the next time your children or your grandchildren want to know why they should be Jewish – remember Twitter: message first – and remember *Rosh Hodesh* – it is our job to light the fires that will burn in the hearts of future generations. Our challenge is to be the message. If we will live the message, Jews will be twittering for generations to come.

So here is my twitter for today: “The new month of *Iyyar* will begin next Friday and Shabbat. May it hold blessing for us and for all the people Israel. Amen