

Parshat Vayakhel-Pekuday
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Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

In the beginning there was only one phone; one phone in each home. And God saw that it was good so he made the phones fruitful and they multiplied. Then there was a phone at home and one at work – and God created extensions and second and third lines so that there were many phones at home and many phones at work. There was a phone in the kitchen and in the living room and in the bedroom and yea if thou wast very fortunate there was a phone in the bathroom – and there was line one and line two and maybe even line three – with little buttons that lit up to tell you which line to pick up. And then God created portable phones – so we could take our phone from room to room and yea even unto the deck and whilst we were grilling outside or sitting by the pool there wast a phone. And then God created mobile phones so we could have phones with us at all times – phones in our cars and then yea, the phones became so small and so portable and with such good batteries that we could carry them on our person and never be out of reach. And as the phones multiplied so did our need to charge them. We had phone chargers at home and phone chargers at the office. We had phone chargers for our car - -and yea God even created phone cases with battery chargers embedded in them. And God kept creating newer and newer models of phones– 5, 6, 7, 8 – yea, even Iphone X and woe to the man (or woman) who had an old phone, a slow phone or a flip phone. So, we cried out to the Lord as we were drowning in chargers and telephones – but God hardened His heart and did not hear our cry. We continued to pray and hope that God would see our vexation and pay heed to the cry that rose up to Him by reason of our technology that was slowly becoming a curse rather than a blessing.

The torah states in today's *parasha*: *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day." (Exodus 35:3) And I suspect that few of us would be willing to trade the "curse" of these modern conveniences to go back to the days before Nest when you actually had to kindle a fire to keep your house warm on Shabbat. But, if fire presented a challenge for our ancestors thousands of years ago – the one thing that remains unchanged is that technology continues to present its share of challenges to us today. Yes, we have come a long way from the days when fire was our major technological invention, but the issue of technology and the management of technology remains a challenge for us in 2018 no less than it did for our ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai. *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day." Shabbat was for our ancestors a time to re-evaluate their relationship with technology and it remains no less valuable for that today. Shabbat forced our ancestors to accept that either they would manage their technology – or their technology would manage them.

Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day." This verse is a challenge – it calls on us to assess the role that technology plays in our life – and once a week reassert our dominance over the things that threaten to control us. *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day," was a call to keep your priorities straight – to remember what was vital and what was not so important.

We Jews are not Luddites – a term used to an informal movement of those who oppose technology and its intrusion into our lives. The verse from the Torah does not demand that we eschew fire – it merely asks us to keep it under control.

For most of us sitting in this Sanctuary this morning technology has not been much of a problem – in fact most of us have not given the matter much thought, it has just been a natural and wonderful part of our lives - we have embraced it without question as a boon to mankind. I remember the first time I took my family to Disney World down in Florida and we visited GE's Carousel of Progress exhibit in Tomorrowland. How many of you remember that exhibit? It deals with a family going through the years and it demonstrates how that same family had progressed and benefited as a result of the technological innovations that had enriched their lives. And in the background, behind it all, there is an upbeat song the lyrics of which where: "There is a great big beautiful tomorrow..." And well, for me and I suspect for most of you - that has more or less been my take on this technology thing. To recall a time when so much effort went into cleaning clothes and dishes and the house - when getting from one place to another was such an effort, when communication was a matter of days and weeks not seconds - how could the technology that made all these conveniences be anything less than wonderful?

Yes, our cell phones are a blessing, as are our Nest Thermostat's and dishwashers and washing machines, our televisions and automobiles – but, the need for perspective is no less important today than it was when our Torah commanded: *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day."

I saw a meme on my Facebook feed this past week – maybe some of you saw it as well. I printed a copy of the picture and although it is too small for most of you to see it from your seats – you are welcome to come see it later – I will describe it for now.

The picture appears to be of a woman sitting in the waiting area of an airport – waiting for her plane to board. Her suitcase is by her side. And she sits staring at the cell phone in her hand – and on the floor, at her feet – is her baby. No one seems to be paying any attention to the baby – certainly not the mother. A woman sitting nearby is glancing at the scene – no doubt wondering about the woman sitting next to her and her strange choice of priorities. This woman has been blessed with a baby...and a phone – and yet the baby lies ignored on the floor while the phone has her full attention.

There is a quote at the bottom of this picture – it is attributed to Albert Einstein: "I fear the day when our technology surpasses our humanity. The world will be left with a generation of idiots." Some question whether Einstein actually said this – but it is no less brilliant either way.

We too should fear the day when our technology surpasses our humanity and it is time to wonder if we are becoming a generation of idiots.

This is what the Torah was trying to teach us in this verse: *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day." Shabbat first, fire second. Babies first – phone – second. Humanity first, technology second.

What comes first in your life? Maybe it is time for all of us to put down our phones and pick up our babies. This is the challenge presented by Shabbat. This is the question posed by the Torah.

We have all but lost the ability to wait patiently. Next time you are in any situation that requires a wait – look around you – everyone, and I mean everyone will be looking at their phones. No one is talking to each other. We are losing our humanity. Watch as people walk up to the counter or check-out line talking on the phone. They completely ignore the human being behind the counter or at the cash register – their phone has their complete attention.

No one is asking you to give up your phones – me least of all.

There are those who might read the verse from today's Torah reading: *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day," and see it as an outright rejection of technology. The ancient Karites did. Their reading of the Bible demanded no fire on Shabbat – and they sat in their homes on Shabbat in the dark and in the cold. This they claimed was the way God wanted it.

But our rabbis did not agree. In this verse they did not see a rejection of technology as much as a desire to gain mastery over it. *Lo t'va-arū eysh b'chol moshvoteychem* "Do not light a fire in any of your habitations on the Sabbath day." Look where that verse is placed! It is placed in *Vayakhey!-Pekuday*, in a section of the torah that describes the detailed building of the *mishkan*, a tabernacle, a portable tent which the Israelites carried with them through the desert. The tent was handcrafted; it used all the technological advancements that were available to them at the time: fire and sewing and metallurgy and so forth. Rabbinic tradition sees a parallel between the Israelites building the *mishkan*, the tabernacle and God's original building of the world. The same Hebrew words are used in the description of both. Creation was the ultimate divine technological feat of its time and building the tabernacle was the ultimate human technological feat of its day and age. Humans imitated God as creators. The *mishkan*, the tabernacle became a paradigm for human ingenuity and creativity.

In the Bible, fire is the symbol of creative power. After all, light was the first thing God created. How does God feel about our technological prowess, of our using fire? To the ancient Greeks, technology was the realm of the gods. When Prometheus stole the fire, he was trespassing on a realm not permitted to him. Fire, and by extension, all technology, was not for humans. Play with fire and you WILL get burnt.

The Biblical view is very different. Fire is given to us humans to use. We are encouraged to use our technological prowess, to create and build, to imitate God in making things for this world. We are encouraged to create for six days a week. Once a week, on Shabbat, we are instructed to leave fire alone. Shabbat is a time to remind ourselves that we are not God. In the very torah portion that focuses on the building of the *mishkan*, that spends most of its time speaking of the greatest technological feat of the time - there is included an injunction to limit our embrace of technology, to manage our infatuation with technology so that we master it and it does not master us. To refrain from lighting fires for one day a week becomes an expression of self-control and perspective. We are being taught not to reject technology – we are counseled how to master it.

Shabbat in particular and Jewish religion in general becomes the mechanism by which we are encouraged to move forward in a world of technology and at the same time not lose sight of our values and priorities. In today's Torah portion it is as if the Bible recognized the potential and the danger inherent in progress and sought to define a course that would enable us to both embrace the potential and protect ourselves from the danger. Technological innovation and Shabbat observance became the formula for human success. It became the way I placed my humanity over technology as Einstein would have wanted us to, as Moses would have wanted us to, as God would have wanted us to. I observe Shabbat as a reminder of the limits of modernity and the boundaries of technological achievement.

There is a "A great big beautiful tomorrow" - as the song tried to teach us. If we Jews continue to study our Torah and observe Shabbat we need not fear that our technology will overwhelm our humanity. So, don't call me on my cell phone today – it's Shabbat. But tomorrow you can reach me at 516....