

**ROSH HASHANAH EVENING 5773**  
**SEPTEMBER 16, 2012**  
**I and Thou in the Era of Google Glasses**  
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Close your eyes. Imagine walking down the street in the middle of Manhattan. As you look up, you notice the sky is starting to get a little gray, and an icon pops up in your field of vision letting you know that there's an 80% chance of rain for the rest of the day. With that helpful information you know that you're probably going to need an umbrella, and you certainly don't have one with you. So as you look at the stores on the street you start to get suggestions about which ones are good, and especially which ones carry umbrellas.

Umbrella in hand, you run into someone who clearly knows you, and you cannot for the life of you remember their name. As you struggle to remember their name their Facebook page suddenly appears. Their name, birthday, spouse and phone number show up, and you are able to continue the conversation without even the slightest slip up. As you talk, you start to scroll through their Facebook timeline, hoping to get a tidbit of information about them to make the conversation more interesting.

We are living in a remarkable age. With the dawn of 5773, it feels as if every year, technological innovations abound in new and exciting

ways. One of this years innovations will be a device called Google Glasses. These Glasses will be able to do most of what I just described, and Google is working to turn this tool into a consumer good with even more amazing tools. If you want a sneak peak, there are a series of promotional videos on YouTube for these Google Glasses. These Glasses are one of many examples of augmented reality, or the ability to see the world with an overlay of the information of the Internet. Every day we are inching closer to a tool that will be able to match a face to a person's profile instantly. We will be able to look out at someone whom we have never met, and instantly Google them.

Google Glasses are best described in Hebrew as *Norah*: which means both wondrous, and terrifying. This tool is wonderful for it has to capacity to revolutionize the way we interact with the world and other people. As someone who looks out at the thousands of people that make up our community, I look longingly at the Google Glasses, and hope that they can come sooner. The ease at which it could make remembering someone's name is staggering, and somewhat awe-inspiring.

The aspect of these Glasses that is terrifying is a bit more nuanced. The most obvious challenge was raised four years ago in Nicholas Carr's provocative article "Is Google Making us Stupid?" Carr questioned our

ability to absorb longer form articles and books because of the immediacy of the web. My terrifying question is Carr's albeit modified: "Will Google Glasses Make our Relationships Stupid?" and more to the point, is the ubiquity of social media and web technology making our relationships stupid already?

Right now, when we meet a new person how many of us Google them, or check them out on Facebook right afterward? Or for that matter are there people in our lives that we met first via the Internet? I really wonder, how is it that we get to know someone today? Is it by reading their facebook updates, reading their text messages and emails, or by conversing with them in person? Is it by the actions that we see them doing, or by the photos they have posted of their antics? How do we truly know people?

We are living in a world where more information about each and every person is available than in any other time in history. Our digital persona is a haven for those moments that are in that odd mixture of private and public, where things that were once intensely private have begun to be trumpeted in the public sphere.

It is this blend, of immense content that is at our fingertips that sparks both excitement and fear in my mind. What I fear is our ability

to see the person sitting across from us as separate from their digital persona. The digital persona isn't simply the embarrassing photo or two, the stream of text messages, or the constant flow of updates ranging from what was for lunch to a cat falling in the toilet. There is also the tendency to edit our words and images online to present a particular persona.

The photo that is posted everywhere of me is definitely me. However, I had a bright red cut on my nose the day we took the picture, and that's gone. It was taken 5 months ago, while my wife Kate and I were anxiously awaiting the arrival of our son Benjamin. With all that pressure lets just say I had more than a few bags under my eyes, which have magically disappeared. The vanity that I displayed in editing my photo does not change who I am. When I meet someone new, regardless of my ever-balding head, to what clothes I am wearing, it is the content of my character that the other person should be measuring, not the cut on my face. While the physical profile always plays a role in forming relationships, it should not be the defining aspect that connects us, for at some point we need to stop looking at our noses, and start looking at our hearts.

The challenge of technology's impact on relationships has been the focus of a great deal of study by MIT researcher Sherry Turkle. She has given a Ted Talk, written books and articles on the subject. She notes, "Texting and e-mail and posting let us present the self we want to be. This means we can edit. And if we wish to, we can delete. Or retouch: the voice, the flesh, the face, the body. Not too much, not too little — just right."<sup>1</sup>

Digitally we can cast ourselves in any way we wish. Yet I wonder: will we really know a person, or just an image that they have concocted for themselves? Will sitting across from someone with that constant stream of editorialized data really make our relationships deeper, or will it create a deeper problem?

Martin Buber, in his seminal work, *I and Thou*, suggests that we have in our lives two types of interactions, moments of I-Thou, and moments of I-It. The moments of I-It are the times when we are interacting with the world in a transactional way. It is our analytical and observational mode. We can all conceive of interacting with objects as I-It, an example is that I used my computer to write this sermon. I

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all>

have no great affection or perception that my computer is anything more than a tool. This is, according to Buber our natural way of operating in the world.

This also extends to our relationship with human beings. Typically we operate with other people as the "It." The easiest opportunities for I-It relationships occur in the service economy. It is so easy to look out at the server at a restaurant, the mechanic in a garage, or any of the myriad of other service people in our lives, and not see them as anything more than an It. They serve a function. They bring us our food, and we appreciate that. However, we don't interact with them, they are a server, and we appreciate that service.

The moments of I-Thou are moments of relationship. These experiences of encounter are what feed our souls and what we strive for in our relationships with other people. They are times where we truly interact with someone without concern for appearance, or their history. It is these instances that are fleeting, and rare. Moments of I-Thou are so hard to cultivate that we only know we've been a part of one after they have occurred. It is only then when we see that spark of divinity within another and we have a moment of connection. Gone are the earthly concerns, and banished are the opportunities to nitpick their outfit. It is

instead a true moment of connection. It is impossible to live ones life entirely in an experience of I-Thou, rather Buber argues that we should be constantly striving to create opportunities for these powerful encounters. It is those moments that I wonder how much Google Glasses will push away. How easy is it going to be to focus on a person long enough to really have a moment of true encounter, where we leave the earthly concerns behind, if we are constantly seeing their past appear beside them? Is it even possible to see someone as anything other than the “It” in that relationship?

Take a moment and consider the relationships that are deepest in our lives. The ones with good friends, with spouses, with family. For some of us it isn't hard to imagine them, they are sitting right next to us. However close your eyes, and take a serious moment to consider who they are and why they mean something to us, how are they known to us? Is it from the outfits they wear and the snapshots of our lives? Is it from reading their status update on Facebook? Or is it from the serious conversations you've had about what it means to be a friend, a parent? Is it from the times where you shared your deepest fears, and they did the same? Or is it simply a feeling of connection that cannot be

described? How can we deepen those relationships and establish new ones when all we see is the IT with no potential for Thou?

Sherry Turkle argues that this world where we are not relating to one another is already the world we live in. She writes: “At home, families sit together, texting and reading e-mail. At work executives text during board meetings. We text (and shop and go on Facebook) during classes and when we’re on dates....We’ve become accustomed to a new way of being “alone together.” Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected to wherever we want to be....”<sup>2</sup>

A regular public service announcement of our time is to avoid distracted driving. Don’t text or use the phone while driving as it distracts you from your core responsibility of being safe on the road. My hope is that we strive to avoid distracted living: that we avoid the siren song of the status update, and text message alerts when we are interacting with other people. The immediacy of communication, and the choices we make with technology threaten our ability to have I-Thou experiences. How many of us have answered a phone call, when in the

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

midst of a conversation, or read a text or an email while chatting with someone? The message we send is that whoever is sitting in front of us is less important than the beckoning of the digital world. We now may know more facts about the person sitting across from us than ever before. How much harder is it going to be to set aside our technology in that moment when it has shifted from our palms to our faces? We need to be able to turn from head to heart, from cold facts to feeling and having moments of connection.

Now I am in no way against the use of social media, digital communication and the tools these technologies offer us for connecting to others. I had quite a circuitous route to the Rabbinate, and as such my bachelors degree is in Information Systems, and I've spent a great deal of time working on enhancing our ability to connect digitally with our community. Yet there is a sharp distinction between knowing about someone, and knowing someone. Technology gives us the opportunity to know about someone. Our face to face relationships help us to truly know someone.

These moments of I-Thou are the defining aspects of our relationships with other people. When tragedy strikes us, what is the impact of a hug and sitting down with someone versus a text message or

a facebook? At moments of extreme joy what is the difference between having friends and loved ones present and a congratulatory email? Being truly present for another person is one of the greatest gifts we can give, for in so doing, we create space for deepened relationships.

Our world is changing every day. Some scholars have argued that we have entered an era of “Liquid Time” where change is the norm, and the world of next year will be so radically different that it will be hard to imagine our previous existence. Who knows what technological innovation will shift our understanding of what it means to be in a relationship next year or in five years. Yet the power of authentic relationships should not wither. Regardless of the impediments and opportunities that we create in the effort of deepening relationships, they will remain a cornerstone of a meaningful life. Therefore, as 5773 begins, may we all be blessed with the insight and opportunity for more meaningful moments of I-Thou with our without our Google Glasses.