

Remember, 15, 18 years ago, when email was a new thing. Remember the sound of the modem tones, followed by - if we were lucky - AOL's "You've Got Mail!" Email was exciting. Each message was important. Imagine that someone cared enough about us to sit at their computer and compose a message to us. Each message was meticulously read, and we carefully composed a response. Sometimes we printed the email in order to read it more carefully later on or to share the message with someone else.

Fast forward to today. Our email volume has increased 10-fold, 20-fold, or more. Our time in front of the screen is spent not only attending to email, but also to social media like Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest, and blogs, news sites, and shopping sites. Increasingly, we are squeezing in the time to read email on mobile devices - small screens. We have neither the time nor the patience to read long chatty notes from Cousin Leo. The result is that as the volume of email increases, we have less and less time to read it, so our responses tend to be short, often failing to catch the tone or intent or even all of the content of the message. Email has become an increasingly poor means to communicate.

Email has long held the potential for misuse and when used improperly, email has the power to amplify our sins. I discovered this to my dismay several years ago when I received an email from the U of M Hillel soliciting ticket sales for an event I thought Hillel should not be participating in. I sent what I believed to be a private note to the person who sent out the note with some questions about the event, but within minutes my email box began to be flooded with notes from people chiming in to support what I wrote, criticizing me to for criticizing Hillel, and wondering why I sent this note to them. It turned out that the Hillel staff person had inadvertently sent the note from the address which automatically forwarded mail to thousands of people. It took me the better part of the day and many notes of apology before the furor died down.

A recent Alban Institute article suggested that email has replaced the "parking lot meetings," those unofficial conversations often held in parking lots following official meetings that tend to undermine decisions, complain about individuals, and stir up discontent. Email spreads information, accurate or not, quickly, is virtually impossible to stop, and it can be very damaging.¹

Because of the frequent misuse of email, we may consider adding a new section to our confession of sins:

For the sin which we have committed by responding too often.

And for the sin which we have committed by posting private email in a public forum.

For the sin which we have committed by misinterpreting others' words.

And for the sin which we have committed by not expressing ourselves clearly.

For the sin which we have committed by being sarcastic.

For the sin which we have committed by replying to all when the answer doesn't concern 90% of the recipients.

For the sin which we have committed by emailing while angry.

And for the sin which we have committed by sharing too much information.

For the sin which we have committed by not reading the entire message before replying.

And for the sin which we have committed by posting mean spirited comments anonymously that we would not have posted in our own name.

1. Susan Nienaber, <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=10027>

For the sin which we have committed by not checking our sources before reposting or forwarding.

And for the sin which we have committed by emailing rather than talking.

For all of these, Forgiving One, Forgive Us, Pardon Us, and Grant Us Atonement.

We are living in a world in which social media is going to be, perhaps already is, the dominant form of communication and the sins of electronic communication are only going to multiply. It seems to me that social media is ironically named. The more we connect with people using Facebook, the less we connect with people face to face, or at least voice to voice. Electronic communication allows us to feel like we are connected, but does not actually connect us with other people.

In such a world, there is a need more than ever for the Congregation Ahavas Israel's of the world. The more people use Facebook, the greater the need there is for organizations like Congregation Ahavas Israel, which gathers people together in real community weekly. We use social media as one of our tools to let you know what we are doing - we are not opposed to 21st century living - but social media alone cannot make us happier. A recent TED talk by Michael Norton, an associate professor at Harvard Business School, came to an astounding conclusion about what makes people happy. He found that money can make us happy, but once we have enough money to live, just having money does not make a big difference in happiness. It is the way we spend money that makes us happy.

First of all, note that the vast majority of lottery winners report being less happy because they become anti-social in an effort to fend off friends and relatives asking for money.

Norton found that when he gave people money to spend on themselves, there was no change in their reported level of happiness. When he gave people money with the instructions that they were to spend the money on other people, they reported an increase in their level of happiness. His conclusion is that the key to happiness is using money in a way which increases social connectedness.

Norton tested his theory with people of different economic means, including very low income people from Uganda, and found consistent results - spending money on other people makes us happier. In addition, he tested his theory on a totally unexpected group - dodgeball teams. When a dodgeball team was given money to spend on their teammates, the entire team became more successful. Spending money on their teammates strengthened the group connections, and made the individuals and the group happier and more successful.

Michael Norton's experiments prove that being an active part of Congregation Ahavas Israel will make you happier. Giving of yourself, spending money on other people, spending time with other people face to face makes you happier and more successful.

Ahavas Israel can be that kind of place, but only if you help us make it so. I'd like you to think about what you can do and we can do this year to make the synagogue more of a presence in your life. I'd like you to think about you can do and we can do to spin more threads of connection among those who are involved in our programs, our classes, our services. Speak to me, speak to Bill Lewis, speak to Elisabeth Rosewall, Religious Life chair, and speak to Paula Bojsen, Activities chair. Let us know what you think the synagogue should be doing.

My colleague Rabbi Richard Hammerman created a list entitled, "What's a Synagogue For?"

A synagogue is a beacon of Judaism in the community.

A synagogue is a reflection of your values, hopes, aspirations.

A synagogue is a place for Jews to gather for prayer, mutual support, celebration and comfort.

A synagogue is a place to enrich your life, challenge your assumptions and “discomfort the comfortable”.

A synagogue is a place for Jews “to kiddush,” sanctify and socialize together.

A synagogue is a place to learn, grow and reach higher - for each generation.

A synagogue is a place to remember family, friends, mentors and moments.

A synagogue is a vehicle to heighten your sensitivities, encourage your commitments and expand your horizons.

A synagogue is a place to create memories and remember creation.

A synagogue is a place to face the One Who is called, HaMakom, “The Place”.

What would you add to this list? Send me the reasons that the synagogue is important to you, and I will collect them and share them.

May Congregation Ahavas Israel be a refuge and an antidote for the busyness and the noise and the distraction in which we immerse ourselves in our daily lives; may we find peace and companionship among friends here; and may the synagogue remain a place of strength and holiness, of connection both to God and to community, for many years to come.