



LeoBaeckTemple

Rosh Hashanah Family Sermon 5787
Panim el Panim: Contact is Not Connection
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The other day, I was playing *Uno* with my daughter, and she was taking what seemed like an eternity to sort through her cards. When she finally looked up, she found me typing out an email on my phone.

“Are you there, Mommy?” she asked politely.

In an instant, I was plunged back into a reality where the only choice that mattered was playing a 2 or a reverse card, and I realized: Actually, I hadn’t been with her. I had been somewhere else entirely.

And I don’t think I’m alone here. Look around any restaurant and you’ll see it: a family out to dinner, each of them lit up by a separate screen. A couple on a date, both looking down. A table of friends, together, but not *with* each other.

This is exactly the fear that seizes an entire generation of toys in Pixar’s *Toy Story 5*. “They aren’t looking at us anymore,” Jessie mourns. “They’re looking *through* us.”

Peering into house after house, she finds every child glued to a device, every parent typing or scrolling, headphones on. And when Jessie’s owner, Bonnie, receives her own Lilypad, and her long-awaited first sleepover becomes four girls staring at four separate screens, even her parents start to wonder: is this friendship, or just proximity?

The girls had contact. Not connection.

Now, I’m no luddite — technology is woven into how we live today, often in useful and powerful ways. But alongside Woody, Buzz, and a bewildered Jessie, it’s worth asking what we’re quietly losing, and whether we’re choosing it purposefully or just letting it happen.

Jonathan Haidt, in the book *The Anxious Generation*, calls devices “experience blockers.” Devices don’t simply distract us. They displace the experiences growing brains actually need to develop: unstructured play, independent exploration, and above all, **face-to-face conversations**.

Our tradition has always known the transformational power of face-to-face dialogue. In the Torah, we’re told:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ.

God spoke to Moses *panim el panim* – face to face, the way one friend speaks to another. Not through an intermediary. Not through a message passed along. Directly. That is how the Torah imagines the deepest bond that exists: nothing standing between us, fully present, fully seen.

And we get to experience the same in our face-to-face interactions. When our partner tells us everything’s fine, but we look in their eyes and know that it’s not. When we catch

the twinkle in our child's smile that no words can describe. When our parents tell us they love us, and we can feel it in their whole being.

The 20th Century Jewish Philosopher Martin Buber calls these I-Thou moments – instances when we stop seeing another person as a means to something, and simply see *them*. To have an I-Thou moment, we must set aside what we're doing and listen with full attention and curiosity to another, not just their words, but their whole selves. When “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly,” Buber writes, “God is the electricity that surges between us.” For Buber, *panim el panim* isn't just an opportunity for connection. It's an opportunity for holiness.

We see this magic unfold for Bonnie and her new friend, Blaze, in *Toy Story 5*. By the end of the film, the two aren't playing side by side on separate screens – they're building a dramatic wedding-mystery adventure together, and you can feel the palpable connection between them. It's the same spark that happens when a friend actually listens to your story...or when a teacher really gets you...or when a family member sees past your armor and asks about your day, and means it.

Technology isn't the enemy. It helps us accomplish so much. But we haven't yet learned to consistently use it with purpose, or to tell the difference between what it gives us and what it can't. Contact, even meaningful contact, is not connection. It never was.

But Judaism offers us something to help us tell the difference: Shabbat. A day when we let go of the illusion that the inbox will ever be empty. A day free of FOMO, when we stop tracking everyone else's everything. A day for shifting from *doing* to *being*... from *contact* to *connection*. When we reignite the humanity that exists between us.

And today is not only Rosh Hashanah, it is also Shabbat.

So let's try something, not as a metaphor, but for real. If you're comfortable, or even a little uncomfortable, and no one's on call: take out your phone right now. Don't silence it. Turn it off. Look at the person beside you – *panim el panim* – and notice what it feels like to be *with* them...to be here, with *us*.

In a moment, we'll hand out a family contract, not a list of rules we give you, but, rather, a promise you write *with* one another, about how you will connect with each other as a family this year. Maybe it's screen-free dinners every night. Maybe it's phones in a basket for Shabbat candle-lighting. Maybe it's a device free game night once a week. It doesn't have to be twenty-five hours. It can start with twenty-five minutes. But try *something*. Something that's doable and something that's meaningful.

And then, we can begin by asking ourselves the same question my daughter asked me over a game of Uno: *Are you there?*

This year, may we answer: yes. We're here. *Panim el panim*. And really mean it.