

Rabbi Sidney M. Helbraun
Temple Beth-El
Northbrook, Illinois

Being Present
Yom Kippur 5777

I don't know how many of you saw this, but Maurizio Montalbini passed away. I know, you're thinking "that name rings a bell, but I can't place it." Montalbini was the Italian sociologist who spent months in a cave studying how the mind and body cope with complete isolation. According to the Tribune, he claimed his first world record after spending 210 days alone in a cave in the Apennine Mountains. He broke this record six years later when he was underground for 366 days. The newspaper said that he was survived by his wife.

You know, something just doesn't sound right about this story: He was survived by his wife? What did he say when he headed off to work? "Bye honey, I'll be gone for a little while. I'm spending the next year in a cave. Don't forget to feed the cat." I know what some of you *guys* are thinking. He must have had cable and a fridge down there. All kidding aside, there was no cable or fridge. It was just Montalbini in a cave, for seven months, by himself.

Can you imagine what that must have been like? Not to see another soul, or hear another voice, except your own, echoing off the walls? Not to see the passing of the seasons, or the sun? Not to know what's going on in the world above? It's scary to contemplate, let alone to actually do. How would you pass the hours? There's nothing to read, nothing to listen to, nothing to create, what would you do?

When Montalbini was asked how *he* coped with the stress of being alone, he said: "One cannot fight solitude; one must make a friend of it. I succeeded in doing this. I carried everything inside me for seven months – affections, convictions, ideals."

The contrast between Montalbini's experience and our own lives could not be more stark. He lived alone in a cave, while we are so connected that the thought of being out of touch for more than five minutes makes us break out in a cold sweat. Do you know that when I meet to sign the *ketubah* before a wedding, I have to remind the wedding party to shut off their cell phones? I tell them that everyone they want to speak to is already here, and if they're not, it's really okay if they miss that call.

And then I see the men slowly take their phones out of their pockets and shut them off.

Honestly, it's a bit painful to watch because everyone looks so uncomfortable. It's almost as if turning off their cell phone is like I'm asking them to stand there naked. They look so insecure, like they know that the moment they turn it off, something really important is going to happen, like the Cubs will score a run, and they'll miss it.

When I think about the relationship we have with our mobile devices, I've begun to wonder if the reason we're so attached to them is because we need to be connected, or if maybe it's the opposite? Perhaps the reason we're addicted to our phones is because they give us a convenient escape route. As long as I have my phone, there's a possibility I might be needed someplace else, right now!

More often than not, these devices don't connect us, they disturb, disrupt, and take us away. That little ring tone or buzz, not only does it prevent us from paying attention to whoever we're with, it also sends a subtle message. It says: you may not be as important to me as whoever is calling. Excuse me while I make that judgment.

The fact is, so many of our lives revolve around running from place to place, and from one conversation to the next. We're on the move so much that many of us have lost the ability to connect. In an odd way, our lives are *not* so different from Montalbini's. For even though we don't live in a cave, we've *also* learned to carry our affections, convictions and ideals *inside* of ourselves. We carry them inside, because our lifestyle doesn't encourage us to share them with others.

In truth, the biggest difference between Montalbini and us is that, when you're living in a cave *you can't escape the fact that you're alone*. When you're up here in our world, so busy with everything under the sun, it's much harder to notice how alone we really are; how much life we're missing.

Am I wrong? Too harsh? Tell me: how often are you fully present? Is there any place you give your undivided attention? Is there anywhere you go that your phone doesn't travel with you? Phones were *supposed* to help us stay in touch, keep us connected, but more often than not they get in the way and interrupt our lives. Sadly, this happens so often we've become accustomed to it and hardly notice how much we've lost.

Sometimes I wonder how different the world would be if cell phones had been invented earlier. If they had them back in Abraham's day, would he have heard God's call. If Isaac Newton had an iPhone, would he have discovered gravity. (A bad "Apple" joke.) If Moses had a smart phone when he was out with his sheep, would he have seen the burning bush. Lucky for us, Moses wasn't texting. He was fully present; able to see the sign and appreciate the moment.

And yet, Moses' response on that day was actually a bit surprising. He seemed a bit

underwhelmed by God's call. In fact, he tried to turn God down. When God said "Go to Egypt and free our people", Moses actually said no. "Why won't you go," God asked. "Because I stutter," Moses said. "I can't be your spokesman."

When God heard Moses' reply God spoke with compassion. God said: "Moses, you are a man of honesty, integrity, and justice. These are the qualities that make you worthy. How can you think that a stutter would diminish you in my eyes?" Moses smiled sadly and replied, "I wasn't worried about how I appear to you. You are merciful and kind. But Pharaoh, and even the Israelites, they are the reason I wish to decline. They are not as compassionate as you. They will seize upon my imperfection and demean not only me, but you as well. They will say: 'Man who was made in the image of God, does your God stutter as well?' And this would be more than I could bear."

Unfortunately, Moses' concern is true. It's not God's harsh judgment we fear the most; it's our neighbors, our boss, and our "friends." Sometimes it's even our spouse, parents, or children. People can be cruel. I believe this is part of the reason we keep that phone in our hand and run away from relationships, because we're not perfect, and in our world people use our imperfections as weapons.

We live in a harsh world, where anyone in the public eye is subject to scrutiny. Entertainers, athletes, politicians, their lives are recorded day and night, and anything they do that can be condemned will be found and put on display. Our society pursues these people, searching for flaws.

And even more disheartening than how we treat celebrities, this approach has become the norm not only for adults, but for children. Early in life children learn that they're constantly evaluated by their parents and teachers. But the evaluation they fear most is that of their classmates. When they want, kids can be sweet as angels. But they can also be cruel and vindictive, especially to each other. We parents may reminisce about carefree days at school, but our memories tend to leave out the pain we felt when we were there. And that pain, scrutiny and evaluation, many of us still carry those wounds with us.

But there's an alternative to this judgmental "American" way of life; there's the Jewish way which teaches that instead of being subjected to a lifetime of evaluation, there should only be one day a year when we're judged; this day, Yom Kippur. For 364 days a year God accepts us, holds us, and loves us, despite our flaws. And on one day, today, we judge ourselves. We look into our soul and ask how we're doing. Can we do better? Can we improve? While our culture preaches non-stop scrutiny, Judaism teaches acceptance, opportunity, and hope.

Every year brings its challenges. Over the last year some lost jobs; others lost a loved one. Some are doing their best to deal with illness, others are coping with a failing marriage. Some are working hard to raise their children and pay the mortgage. Life's not easy. And not only are there daily stressors we have to deal with, many of us also carry old wounds, some from childhood, that we've never let go of.

Because we live in a world of wounds, it takes tremendous *courage* to be true to ourselves and share who we are. It takes *strength* to be honest. It requires *trust* to think that we'll be respected, and a leap of faith to believe that what we share will be valued; that others will accept us, and not use our shortcomings against us.

Everyone has experiences they keep hidden away, things that leave them less than whole. But that's not how life has to be. We don't have to live in a cave and hide all our anxieties and fears inside. We can acknowledge our pain, and share it. And if we do, if we have enough trust to share those pieces of ourselves with those we care for, with those who care for us, some of our heartaches and burdens can be transformed. How do I know? I've experienced it myself.

I'm often asked how I became a rabbi. Today I'll give an answer that I haven't often shared. I don't think I would be a rabbi if I hadn't participated in a Teen Encounter program when I was sixteen.

I remember that weekend well. My parents dropped me off at a hotel on a Friday and told me they'd pick me up on Sunday. After signing in and getting roommates, I went off to a room with a group of around 30 teens. Each of us received a pen and a notebook, and the program began.

The program itself was very simple. A topic was introduced and a couple of teens shared their feelings about it. Then we listened to a song on the theme and were given time to write. When everyone finished, we were offered a chance to share our writing. This was the structure for the entire weekend.

I have to tell you, it seemed to me that there was something strange about the program, because early in the afternoon on Saturday, people began saying how incredibly blessed they felt, how grateful they were; how special everyone in the room was. When this started happening, I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about. I started thinking my parents had brought me to a cult because these powerful testimonials made no sense to me at all; until I was overcome by the feelings they were describing. And decades later I can still remember what it felt like. It was like being washed over by a wave that left a sense of calm, trust, and joy in its wake. It was the feeling of unconditional acceptance.

I had spent less than 24 hours with these people, who had been total strangers. But at some point I realized that I could pour my heart out, tell them who I was, what I felt, what I believed, and no matter what I said, they would listen and accept me. No matter what I said, I would not be judged. And the reason I was able to be so open and honest with them, is because the sharing was reciprocal. *They* were opening up their hearts to me, sharing their hopes, their dreams, their wounds, and I was willing to accept them for who they were. There was no judgment in that room, only acceptance.

There's a great power that lies dormant in each of us, a power that's awakened through relationship, a power that some might even call the presence of God. It awakens when we open our heart to others, and they open theirs to us. It comes when people suspend their sense of judgment and replace it with acceptance. And it creates feelings of wholeness, peace, and even love.

This incredible power, it's there for anyone who's willing to pay the price. I'm telling you it's not cheap. You have to be willing to put down your I-phone. Better yet, turn it off and make time for the people you're with. Give them your undivided attention. Have the courage to be honest, to share your hopes, dreams and desires, even your fears and pains. And give them the strength to do the same.

Judaism teaches that out of 365 days in a year, only one of them is for judgment. The rest of the year, the other 364 are days of acceptance. Days where our challenge is to be present for the people we care for, to put distractions aside, to listen when they tell us who they are, and to reciprocate by being honest about ourselves.

Every year life passes more quickly. The days run together; they fly by. But despite the swift passage of time, each year contains countless opportunities for timeless moments and lifelong memories.

These moments are not few or fleeting. They don't only come on special occasions or vacations. They are present every hour of the day. To create them requires just three things: Set aside distractions, Let go of judgment, and Share who you really are. Three small steps that bring treasures: laughter and joy, pleasure and tears; and riches that will accompany you for the rest of your life.

In this New Year, may each of us unlock our storehouse of riches that lies hidden in plain sight, and give ourselves the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and holiness of life which lies before us each and every day. Amen.