

Community and Society Archive

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Thou Shalt Turn Off Thy Cell Phone:

Do you know the difference between public and private?

By Rabbi Daniel S. Brenner

I now need two hands to count the incidents when I wanted to yell to someone within five feet of me: "For the love of God, shut off your cell phone!" I've wanted to yell this in movie theaters, restaurants, on the train, even in that sacred hall of silence, the library. It is not simply that people are talking that bothers me, but that they are increasingly using the phones for conversations that no stranger should overhear. A teenage girl calls from the train to fight with her mother and declare to the world: "He's a liar! Mom! I never even touched him!" A cab-driver speaking to a bookie: "You better have the [expletive deleted] money!" and countless conversations about meetings and pick-ups and the rest at a volume level which rivals The Who's 1978 tour. I remember the good old days when the glass of the phone booth offered a buffer between

private lives and public discourse.

But now, in this world of Jerry Springer and Barbara Walters tell-alls, I wonder - is it acceptable, maybe even attractive, to spill your guts in public? No longer are people shamed by expressing their deeply felt antagonism or love for others in full view of an audience of strangers. So, hey, why not pull out my cellular and tell the world that my sister's husband is a lazy slug?

This is all rather ironic. It is ironic because ten years ago we imagined that technology would give us an increased sense of privacy when we walked into public spaces. Remember the first time you walked down the street with headphones on? Walkmans, DVD players, personal computers-they each enriched our lives in public spaces while not infringing on others. Yet, that other 'thing with batteries', the flip phone, causes our private lives to leak out like a broken Cuisinart.

This all reminds me of a classic Talmudic parable found in the fiftieth chapter of Baba Kamma:

A homeowner was throwing stones from his private yard into the public street. A righteous man asked, "Why do you move stones from the public property to your own property?" The man laughed, thinking the righteous man to be confused. After many years, the homeowner sold his land and packed up his bags to leave town. On his way out, he stumbled over the stones he had thrown.

There are two layers here. The first is simply that you should keep your private stuff private. Why? Because when you don't, it will make for a rocky road on your journey. This is good advice. The second layer, though, is deeper-it is the wisdom that "everyone's yard has rocks." And in life you have to learn how to live with your rocks in a way that does not impede the lives of those who might be passing by. My extracted interpretation goes something like this: You can't dump your rocks so, hey, why not build with them? Or line a garden? Or lay a path?

Throwing rocks over your fence, or its contemporary cousin -emotionally charged cellular jabber-returns us to one of the key questions which societies must ask in times of freedom and openness. What will remain private?

This is a big question which touches on the ways in which we talk about food, sex and money -- all our basic drives. In recent years, we have blown the roof off of the myth of the perfect family, or the perfect person. The public eye has

focused upon the members of the presidential 'first family' as they have faced numerous questions concerning their private lives. What has been their response? Tell all. Let the details explain the behavior. Ask for understanding. So much for privacy.

So what should be kept private? What should we guard?

There are no clearly defined rules that work for everyone. But this is the question that we should be discussing in our homes and in our communities.

And while we do, I'd like to offer an idea to deal with the initial problem at hand. In a society where communication has taken on Dick Tracy-like trappings, what we need are phone-less phone booths. And since phone booths themselves have been disappearing, we need some new private spaces - perhaps a conical fiberglass hut, like a post-modern tepee. (I'll leave that one to the architects.) Until then, I'll just have to learn to enjoy this soap opera of strangers with unlimited minutes.



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