**Electronic and cyber communication in relationships: futility or utility?**

By Paul Foer/JNS.org

The 30-something businessman was just finishing lunch when a text message came to his fancy device in his suit pocket.

“Dear Mark,

I am sorry but I’m just not ready for a relationship right now. I hope you find everything you are looking for.

—Nancy”

Ouch. Mark slapped his forehead and covered his mouth, wondering how to respond to the woman he had been dating exclusively for nine months. They even talked of marriage.

The above text message was made up by this columnist, but based on many stories from many people in the dating scene, notes like that are not so unusual. Lovers have been spurned and jilted for eons, but cyberspace is brand new. What’s interesting about the sad tale of Mark and Nancy is not so much the dumper and dumpee but the mode of communication—a screen dump. It could have been an email, maybe even a tweet or a Facebook message. If I were any more technically literate, I’d probably know of more ways to leave your lover. Speaking of which, it sure was so much harder in the “good old days” before all this electronic and cyber communication.

All human relationships are of course predicated upon communication, and even the word communication has many meanings. It’s all about meanings and symbols—and exchanging, sending and receiving messages—but nothing, absolutely nothing, beats good old-fashioned human, face-to-face interaction such as talking, touching, looking into one another’s eyes or even sending a handwritten note.

Technology, when used properly, can be a huge advance in real communication—but it can be also a hindrance. There is no doubt that online dating, cell phones, text messages and emailing have served to bring people together, whether across town or across continents, and they have created an amazingly beautiful revolution in many respects. Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and all that other cyberstuff—there are so many ways to communicate, but just as often (if not more often) *miscommunicate*.

In the very worst cases, as described in the above “Dear Mark” letter, it serves as a way to shield both sender and receiver, or to bury or hide behind a spurious rather than genuine form of communication. In other words, it’s much easier for Nancy to dump Mark via text message than it is to have a real conversation with him. Then, if Mark gets perplexed and desperate and wishes to communicate with Nancy, all she has to do is block Mark’s messages, thus making Mark even more dispirited, hurt and annoyed—but perhaps also more resolute in communicating. Then Nancy starts getting scared, feels Mark is threatening her, and is concerned that he is being irrational. All Mark wants to do is—you guessed it—communicate by simply asking “Why?”

Take care not to spend your days sending bits of information back and forth. Sending and receiving messages is faster and easier than ever, but does not always translate into real communication.

One potential date object (Sorry, but what should I call her in this day and age? A potential dater or datee?) wondered why I didn’t respond to her text messages. I told her I don’t do texting. She was aghast. “Everybody texts. It’s how I communicate. You should try it. It’s really great.”

How could I respond to that? The sad part is that her father was a cantor. I wonder how he communicated. That relationship never started because she, though first expressing a strong interest in meeting me, decided that if I didn’t text, we couldn’t even meet. Is that the new criterion in dating? I use an el-cheapo cell phone, have an old computer, never tweet and rarely bother with Facebook, but I write every day and I’m always willing to meet and talk and listen. If seeing my 1996 gray Volvo doesn’t turn women off, they won’t likely mind my Apple 1 with a dial-up modem. Ok. I’m just kidding about the Apple (it’s an old Dell), but not about the Volvo.

I would hypothesize that there is an inverse relationship between the amount of communication means and devices one has and the actual amount of communication that occurs. In other words, the more time a person devotes to texting, emailing, tweeting, Facebooking (yikes—trademark infringement and gerund alert!) and posting, reading and re-posting, the less that person is actually communicating than if he or she were to simply to use the phone or meet.

Is there some kind of a lesson here for Jewish men and women of modernity? We Jews love to talk and debate and gesticulate and make all kinds of expressions, but all that good ethnic communicating tends to get lost in cyberspace. Writing “nu?” is just not the same as shrugging your shoulders, making a face and saying “nu?”

Perhaps consider that our smartphones are like the burning bush of Exodus, in that we “burn” through their bandwidth or battery life, but they don’t get consumed—though they do consume *our* time, dollars and minds.

I have to ask, as does the book of Ecclesiastes, what dating and relationship benefits are new (not “nu”) for us when it comes to cyberspace and telecommunications? Apparently nothing is really new under the sun, but all does not have to be vanities when we communicate in our relationships.

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