

Meir Soloveichik

“The Day the Blackberries Died”

April 18, 2007: a day that will live in infamy. A technical problem at Research in Motion, the prominent company behind Blackberry, caused wireless reception to cease, and millions of professionals were cut off from any email access.

The New York Times reports on the havoc: “Stuart Gold was in Phoenix on a business trip when the service went down. Mr. Gold, the marketing director for Omniture, a software firm, is not proud of what happened next. ‘started freaking out,’ he said. ‘ started taking it apart. Turning it off.

Turning it on. I took the battery out and cleaned it on my shirt. I was running around my hotel like a freak. It’s very sad. I love this thing.’ ...Elaine Del Rossi, chief sales officer for an insurance company, reacted to the severed electronic leash with several panicked calls to her office. ‘ quit smoking 28 years ago,’ she said, ‘and that was easier than being without my

BlackBerry.’” The Times further notes that with people unable to receive email from work, many were free to actually spend time with their family.

Or so one would have thought. Robert Friedman, president of a production company, said the disruption gave him “a lot of free time on my hands to

spend with my wife, although I couldn't find her since her BlackBerry was off.”

Now, the point of the Times piece is that the BlackBerry blackout revealed “just how professionally and emotionally dependent so many people had become on their pocket-size electronic lifelines.” Beginning with the telephone, and ultimately through cell phone or email, we are able to stay in touch with anyone anywhere, and we have grown used to this ability, taking it naturally for granted. And while the capacity for constant contact and communication appears to be a blessing, it has its detractors. Yale Law School's Stephen L. Carter notes that it has brought about the death of letter-writing, of correspondence, and that while through the inventions of the telephone, cell phone, and internet human communication has become easier, it has not necessarily become better. Before the explosion in communications technology, writes Carter, “we had two means of keeping in touch with friends: stopping in for a visit or writing a letter. Each involved a significant investment of time and perhaps resources; in other words, maintaining friendships automatically called us to sacrifice. And, by making those sacrifices, we showed our friends repeatedly how greatly we valued their friendship. Correspondence, in particular, not only preserved and nurtured a relationship but provided a record of it, a testament to its

enduring character.” In other words, an age in which we no longer communicate primarily with through penmanship, all individuality, effort is lost. An email, no matter who it is from, is a hastily typed out bunch of bits and bytes in cyberspace, with no personality and no tangible nature. A letter, on the other hand, a letter from someone special, in his or her hand, painstakingly composed, and lovingly written, becomes an embodiment of its author, a constant and concrete reminder of the beloved. Through a letter a loved one continues to speak to us, if we hearken to the letter’s words carefully enough.

It is with this in mind that we can consider one of the most extraordinary *aggados* of the Talmud. The *gemara* in *Menachos* reports that when Moshe ascended to receive the Torah, he found God sitting a *sofer*, a scribe, slowly writing out the Torah, carefully and painstakingly attaching *tagim*, the little lines on top of the letters, one by one. And Moshe asks him, Who is forcing your hand to do this? In other words, why are you taking the time and trouble to make such lovely letters. Just give us the information. You have a bunch of laws that you want us to keep, print it up, and I’ll report it to klal Yisrael. And God responds, in the future, there will be a man named Akiva ben Yosef, who will deduce from every one of these

letters, from every one of these tiny tagim, *tilei tilim shel halakhos*, tons and tons of exegetical insights.

And the point of this story, as I understand it, is that God, upon giving us the Torah, wanted us to obey his laws, yes, but this was not merely a case of a boss sending around an office memo with a new series of directives.

The Torah, the Talmud is trying to tell us, is God's letter to us; the Torah is his carefully crafted correspondence; the Torah is God's labor of love. And it is with this in mind that we can fully appreciate the Almighty's answer to Moshe. Like a letter from a loved one, every single one of these *osiyos*, every little line on these letters, will be treasured, and treated with enormous significance. For the Jews, the Torah was not a text-message or email to be hastily scrolled through or skimmed, to get the basic gist. There's an old line from Woody Allen: "I took a course in speed reading once. I read War and Peace in 10 minutes! It's about Russia." The Torah was not speed-read. The Jews pored over the Torah day after day, year after year, millennia after millennia, with new exegetical insights gleaned, new deductions discovered because they saw it as a treasured correspondence from a beloved. And just as we a beloved speaks to us through a letter, God, the Jews believed, speaks to us through the Torah, teaching us new *chidushim* from generation to generation. The phrase recited daily in birkhos haTorah is noteworthy;

barukh ata Hashem, hamelamed Torah le-am Yisrael, blessed are you God who teaches torah to Israel. A response from one of the *rishonim* once questioned whether this could possibly be the correct text. After all, God does not teach us Torah in the present, rather it is we who learn that text that was communicated millennia ago. But the answer, I would suggest, that through a letter lovingly written, an author's voice can continue to be heard. An old Yiddish anecdote describes an illiterate father in a shtetl whose son went off to the big city. When the father received a letter from his son, he would go to the town store to find someone who could read Yiddish, and read him the letter. So he received a letter from his son, and he brought the letter to someone in the store, who opened it up, and read it matter of factly as follows: *Tatah ich darf a sach zachen*. I need a lot of stuff. *Shik mir gelt tateh*. Send me money father. The father affronted, says *azah chutzpah*, such disrespect, so demanding, *afilu kein ein pruta shik ich nit*, I'm not even sending him one cent. And then someone else in the store says no, you're not reading it right, give me the letter, and he takes the letter, and reads the exact same words, only as follows: *tateh, ich darf a sach zachen, shik mir gelt tateh*. And the father, much impressed, says *yetzt ret er vi a mench*, now my son's talking with *derekh erez*. In a letter, the voice of the letter-writer can be heard.

God continues to teach us because the Tanach is a love letter through which he speaks, if we listen carefully enough, and in the right way. In an lecture on Torah min Hashamayim, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that Elijah, standing on Sinai centuries after Moshe, hears God as a *kol demama daka*, which he explains means a voice that you can hear only if you are listening for it hard enough. And it was because of this *kol*, he argues, that Jews were able to endure. In an age in which all prophecy- the ultimate wireless communication- was cut off, in an age of dispersion and persecution, in which all reception from Heaven seemed to cease, Jews focused on that text. In his words, the Torah “is God's letter to us. His way of saying : While our paths may diverge, there may be times when I am a long way away - read this letter I have written you and then I will be there with you. That is how Jews survived for 2000 years in exile, without ever once feeling abandoned by God because, so long as the Torah was with them, God was with them. That was His letter. That was the drama of the *kol demama daka*. That voice that we could hear if we listened hard enough. Wherever they were in Eastern Europe, in Spain, in Yemen - wherever they were, when they read Torah they heard the voice of God and they knew we were together. The Torah is not a conventional text at all. It is like a letter from a father to a child. That is the meaning of *Torah min hashomayim*. What is Torah? Torah

is the world we enter when, through an act of active listening, we hear the voice of God.”

In an article in the Weekly Standard, the essayist Joseph Epstein writes with annoyance of how cell phones have changed what was once a quiet commute to work:

Everyone, I suspect, has had a moment when he wished he could grab the cell phone from a boisterous talker and smash it on the sidewalk. A friend of mine named Ann Poole told me about sitting on a commuter train from her suburb into Chicago, in front of a young woman who made no fewer than ten cell phone calls to friends, explaining in great detail why she was changing the restaurant in which she was giving a lunch party that Saturday. Many of the people she called weren't in, so, in a loud and irritating voice, she left elaborate instructions on voice mail about the change in plan along with the reasons for the change. "Hi, this is Amy Hemstead [I'm making up the name], and I thought I'd let you know that I've changed the location of Saturday's lunch from the Zodiac Cafe to Phil Stefani's. We're still meeting at noon. . . ." And then she babbled on a bit more as my friend Ann, who fervently believes that trains are for reading not phoning, seethed in a quiet but genuine rage.

"Did you do anything about it?" I asked.

"I said nothing," she replied, "but when I got to work, I called Stefani's and, using dear Amy's name, I cancelled her reservation for Saturday."

We live in a noisy world; and often, enclosed in our cacophonous cocoon or sound, it is often difficult for us to hear the voice of God. But what about *Shabbos*, when for one day we have silence? Recall the Verizon cell phone commercial's tagline: Can you hear me now? That is what God is saying to us in shul in *Shabbos*. What about now? When the ringing of the cell phones cease, when the buzzing and beeping blackberries are momentarily silenced, for the few precious hours before you open up an inbox laden with electronic letters, can you hear me now? When the Torah,

my carefully crafted correspondence containing my kol demama daka, is
read in shul, can you hear me now?

And of course we can- if only we are willing to listen.