Thoughts for Shavuoth 5770

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My wife and I recently had dinner in a fine New York kasher restaurant. At a nearby table, a father and daughter (about 12 or 13 years old) were seated together. How nice, I thought, that this father wanted quality time with his daughter, and took her out to a special dinner. However, the father soon received a call on his cell phone, and he was on the phone for the entire time that we were in the restaurant. The "quality time" with his daughter was not of a very high quality. She was picking away at her dinner, staring off into space, as her father talked endlessly on his cell phone.

How did these two people interpret their evening at the restaurant? The father may well have thought he was a good father--he would be proud to tell his friends that he took his daughter out to a nice restaurant, that he spent a lot of money to order her a terrific dinner. She may well have thought that her evening was a dismal failure, that her father talked on the phone instead of to her, that he was hopelessly out of touch.

This scene led me to think about the growing superficiality in interpersonal relationships. People are forever talking on cell phones or texting messages--and ignoring the people who are closest to them. Our society is talking more, but people are communicating less.

This superficiality is evident also in our relationship with God. A photo was circulated on the internet of a man at prayer at the Kotel--with a cell phone held to his right ear! At first glance, it looks like a scene of piety; but when examined more carefully, it is a scene of religious superficiality. The body is there, but the mind is somewhere else. So it can be when we are reciting our prayers--we mouth the words, but our thoughts are elsewhere. So it can be when we perform mitzvoth in a mechanical way, without feeling the deep reverence that should rightly accompany our religious deeds.

On Shavuoth, it is customary to read the book of Ruth. One scene in the story describes Naomi, with her two daughters-in-law. Naomi is returning to the land of Israel, and she advises Ruth and Orpah to return to their own families and stay with their own people in Moab. Orpah kisses Naomi, and returns to her family; but Ruth stays with Naomi. Orpah was courteous and proper; but Ruth "clung" to

Naomi. Ruth wanted to share Naomi's fate, to be part of the Israelite people, to worship the God of Israel.

According to tradition, Goliath was a descendant of Orpah. David descended from Ruth. The message: the Orpah model of superficial courtesy leads to Goliath; the Ruth model of total commitment leads to King David and the Messiah.

On Shavuoth, we celebrate the anniversary of the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. The Torah is a tree of life to those who cling to it strongly. What is needed in our relationship to Torah is not a superficial respect, but a genuine love and involvement. Do we kiss the Torah politely, or do we cling to it?

In a society where shallowness in relationships is ever more prevalent, we all need to work on deepening our commitments--to our family members, to our friends and associates, to our Torah, to our God.

***The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (www.jewishideas.org) wishes you a happy Shavuoth. Moadim leSimha. May the example of Ruth inspire us to a happier, better and more meaningful life.

Angel for Shabbat