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40 years ago this month, on September 2, 1969, a very significant event took place in a lab at UCLA. Now, on this 40th anniversary of that event, most people today have no idea that it even happened, even though it would change the course of human society. Here's what happened: On that day, a group of computer scientists connected two computers together with a length of gray wire and succeeded in transmitting a tiny scrap of information – just a few bits of data – from one computer to the other. By today's standards, this was not a monumental breakthrough. But looking back now, we realize that that day was so significant because that tiny transfer of data meant that those scientists had created the first link in the electronic network that we now call the Internet.

It took quite a while after that day for the Internet to look anything like it does today. But as more and more computer terminals were linked together, the scientific world built up great hopes for the technological marvel that would enable the world to work toward scientific unity and enlightenment. The Internet would be that rare tool of pure research, with which researchers all around the globe could work together and freely trade limitless amounts of information.

How little the engineers in that computer lab that day knew about how their breakthrough would be used in the 21st century. It is certainly clear that the Internet has empowered researchers to study the world, but we are just beginning to realize that it also makes it possible for us to be the subjects of study and scrutiny, as corporate and government entities gather, trade, and sell data about us on a worldwide market.

Louis Brandeis was the one who first said that “[s]unlight is the best disinfectant.”¹ We would hope that the light of research would only be used to illuminate truth. But frequently it can also be used to expose our private lives, our personal truths that might be better off left in the dark.

Those UCLA scientists in the late 60’s would certainly have agreed that the world we live in bears little resemblance to theirs. Their world was one with considerably more privacy and modesty; people didn’t share the most intimate details of their lives quite so publicly or so eagerly. Back then, a “social network” meant the Elks lodge or the country club. Today, “social networking” means something else entirely. Now, our lives are lived increasingly online in “virtual” community with others. Very few of us can claim to have remained totally removed from the electronic world. Anyone who uses a credit card, a cell phone, even a TollTag, has information about their private life floating around in cyberspace.

¹ Brandeis, Louis D. *Other People’s Money — and How Bankers Use It*. (1914)

One researcher has described electronic data as “the pollution of the information age,”² because it’s left behind after every electronic interaction we have in our lives. And, just like toxic waste in the physical world, it can exist forever, unless we make a point of disposing of it safely and ethically; otherwise we risk potentially damaging consequences. Just about every action we take online leaves some electronic residue behind. It’s like we leave our fingerprints on everything we touch online, and anyone who knows how to read those fingerprints may find them extremely valuable. Any time we buy a book on Amazon, that corporation records our browsing and purchasing habits. Have a DVD sent to your home through Netflix, and the company refines its profile of what you like to watch. Travel on the Tollway and the transponder records exactly when your TollTag passed through exactly which tollgate.

Your credit card companies track your purchases; your internet browser tracks your surfing history. Your cell phone provider keeps track of the voicemails and text messages you receive, and if you’ve got an iPhone, AT&T can use GPS to determine where you are at any given time. If you’ve got a Bluetooth device or a WiFi-enabled laptop, the same thing. If you use web-based e-mail, your internet service provider has access to every message you send or receive. If you’re active on social networking sites, if you maintain a blog, a Facebook page, or a Twitter account, you have even more places where your conversations with the world – or with your loved ones – can be recorded, stored, and regurgitated upon demand.³

² Bruce Schneier, “Privacy in the Age of Persistence” [blog post – cite?]

³ Ibid.; see also Schneier, “The Future of Privacy” [blog post].

One new principle fact the world we live in, in contrast to the world that gave birth to the Internet, is that today, personal information about us does not belong to us. It belongs to whoever collects it, and those collectors can do whatever they please with it.⁴ Like those TV shows where a hair or a flake of skin can incriminate a suspect after he's left the scene of a crime, our fingerprints remain online long after we are gone. There are simply no secrets anymore. Or, if that's not quite true, then we can say at least that our secrets no longer belong only to us. They belong to our ISP, our cell provider, our credit-card companies, the corporations that own the websites we frequent. As the science fiction writer Neal Stephenson once said, today we no longer need to fear Big Brother; what we need to fear instead are thousands of Little Brothers.⁵ In today's world, just as much as our time or our money, our information has value.

For corporations, our information has value because we may represent a demographic that they're interested in marketing to. For the law enforcement agencies that trade in digital data, it has value because it can increase prosecution of crime, encourage people to be more circumspect about their behavior, and lead to a safer society. All in all, it seems that other people are much more interested in our personal information than we are. As the corporate world and the intelligence community become more and more eager about harvesting secrets, we become more and more willing to let them. Maybe we've come to believe that our own privacy – our own secrets – are better off in the hands of others.

The author and security consultant Bruce Schneier points out that

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Paraphrased in <http://www.journal-online.co.uk/article/3103-where-orwell-got-it-wrong>.

if we are observed in all matters, we are constantly under threat of correction, judgment, criticism, even plagiarism of our own uniqueness. We [are] constantly fearful that...patterns we leave behind will be brought back to implicate us.⁶

Knowing that we are constantly being watched means that we lose the sense of self that makes us who we are. Not all secrets mean we are guilty of something. The love letters we write, the songs we sing in the shower, the secret dreams and sadnesses we harbor are all part of the human experience, and we have the right to know that they are safe. We are our secrets, in a certain way, and for us to lose the confidence that they are ours alone robs us of a critical component of our identity.

It becomes problematic – socially and spiritually problematic – when our secrets land in hands that do not have proper regard for them, that lack a certain reverence for them; after all, data miners are interested in our secrets for their profit, not our gain. If we are to be watched – if we are to surrender our secrets – we need to know that we are being watched by eyes that can be trusted.

For centuries, traditional Jewish text has suggested that this is precisely the way we should think about God – that God is essentially the One who Watches. In *Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi is asked by his students: How does someone get on the moral “straight path” in life? How does a person avoid sin and earn the respect of his fellow human beings? The rabbi responds:

⁶ Schneier, “The Value of Privacy” (blog post; cite).

Reflect on three things, and you will not fall into the hands of sin. Know what is above you: an Eye that sees, an Ear that hears, and all your deeds recorded in a Book.⁷

Long before the invention of the Internet, long before the 4th Amendment and modern ideas about privacy and secrecy, Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi has given voice to a strikingly contemporary commentary that sounds incredibly at home in today's world. With the right kind of trustworthy party watching us, he teaches, it is completely appropriate for us to trade privacy in exchange for moral and ethical lives.

1400 years later, the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Jewish world's foremost legal code, opened with a few lines of commentary written by Rabbi Moshe Isserles from Krakow. Rabbi Isserles taught that all Jewish law should be based in precisely this kind of awareness, the knowledge that God is very close to us, watching our every move. He writes:

"I have set the Eternal before me constantly" (Psalms 16:8); this is a major principle in the Torah and is among the virtues of the righteous who walk before God. ... [One must remember] that the Great Sovereign, the Holy Blessed One, whose glory fills the earth, is standing over us and watching our actions... [Thus] we acquire fear and submission in dread of God, Who is Blessed, and remain constantly humbled.⁸

We must wind up feeling humbled, even ashamed, if we constantly sense that God is watching us, because we know that we fall short of what God expects of us. We sing it again and again on the High Holy Days: "*Avinu Malkeinu, choneinu va-aneinu, ki ein banu ma'asim.*" – "*Avinu Malkeinu*, be gracious to us and answer us, for we have little

⁷ *Pirke Avot* 2:1

⁸ From the opening lines of *Darchei Moshe*, Rabbi Isserles's commentary on the *Tur*.

merit.” God has every right to deal harshly with us because God – who the liturgy calls “*zocher kol ha-nishkachot*” – the One who remembers all that has been forgotten – is always able to find evidence of our inadequacy.

This is exactly the kind of world we live in today. We have fewer and fewer secrets every day; someone knows where we are going, what we are buying, what we are watching and listening to and reading. Even our most embarrassing magazine subscriptions or thoughtless e-mail messages can come to light if the owner of that data chooses to let them.

The problem is that for many of us, the image of an all-seeing Eye and all-hearing Ear is hard for us to come to terms with in our religious lives. Maybe we have a hard time believing in a God who is watching constantly and waiting for us to mess up. Maybe we have a hard time believing in God at all. Maybe we doubt that just by being watched, we will somehow turn into good people who live moral Jewish lives. Just like in law enforcement, the fear of punishment alone can’t guarantee that someone will make ethical choices. The conclusion this may carry us to is that a cosmic watcher, no matter how powerful or how omnipresent, can’t transform our lives alone. What we need instead is a lot of watchers.

As you may know, an observant Jew can say dozens of blessings in the course of a lifetime and even in the course of a day. The wording of these blessings is laid out in the Talmud and the rabbinic codes. We know a lot of them already: the blessings over wine

and bread, for candle lighting and Kiddush. Tonight I want to teach you a blessing that you may not already know. It's particularly rare because very few people have the chance to recite it in a normal lifetime. This is the blessing that is traditionally recited upon seeing 100,000 Jews together in the same place. (Even at Temple Emanu-El on the High Holy Days, that is a rare occasion!) Here's how the blessing goes:

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, chacham ha-razim.

Blessed are you Adonai, Ruler of the universe, the wise knower of secrets.

Isn't that a marvelous title for God? The "knower of secrets." It's such an evocative way to think about God, and certainly one that fits with our tradition's beliefs about what God is and what God does. But the big question is why this should be the blessing we say when we see a huge crowd of Jews, together in the same place at the same time. Calling God the "One who brings forth bread" when we're about to eat, or "Creator of the fruit of the vine" when we drink wine makes sense...but what does God's status as the "wise knower of secrets" have to do with being surrounded by other Jews?

Here's what I want to suggest. The times when we are surrounded by other members of our community, the times when we are surrounded by other people who are like us, is a time that we can finally be comfortable and secure that our secrets are safe. We can finally relax and let our guard down because we are around family, and members of a family look out for each other.

Now, being safe around other members of our community doesn't mean that we let each other get away with stuff. That's not what I think it means for our secrets to be secure. And in fact it may mean the opposite – that we hold each other to a higher standard. By now we all know what can happen in the Jewish community when our secrets go unexamined. When individual Jews have moral failings – whether they're the rabbis in New Jersey arrested for corruption and money-laundering, or some guy named Madoff – the scandal inevitably incites much more agony inside the Jewish community than outside it. But when we hear about scandals in the Jewish community and we get embarrassed, that's a positive impulse. My grandparents used to call cases like these “a *shande* for the *goyim*.” But actually, they're a *shande* – a scandal – for us. The misdeeds of one of us can hurt the rest of us in the most painful ways. After all, we're family, and as we all know, no one can hurt us like our own family.

There's a rabbinic legend I want to share with you:

Back in the days of the Talmud, there was a great teacher named Rabbi Yochanan. One of his disciples was a student named Reish Lakish. Reish Lakish used to be a robber and a bandit before Rabbi Yochanan took him in, educated him, and turned him into a brilliant rabbinic scholar. One day in Rabbi Yochanan's study hall, there was a debate over a technical point of Jewish law. The debate centered on the question of how the manufacture of iron weapons is completed. Rabbi Yochanan said: They are burnished in the fire of a furnace. Reish Lakish spoke up and said: No, they are tempered in a cauldron of water. Angry that he had been contradicted, Rabbi Yochanan snapped at Reish Lakish, ‘Well, the robber understands his trade.’ Reish Lakish replied, ‘All the education

I have received has done me no good; my teacher still thinks of me as a criminal. At least when I was a criminal, I had the respect of my colleagues.’⁹

What does it feel like when you learn a secret about someone else? Does it make you feel uneasy? Excited? Does it give you just a tiny twinge of guilty pleasure, knowing that someone’s dark secret has been brought out into the open? Where does that embarrassing thrill come from? Maybe it’s because we’re aware that to know someone else, to be privy to someone’s secrets, means knowing how to hurt them. So how can we ever protect ourselves from vulnerability? The answer cannot be for us to guard ourselves as closely as possible, closing off our inner lives so nothing of them is ever revealed. Otherwise we could never be loved, or be capable of loving others.

Philip Roth wrote that “[t]he worst part of certain secrets is their secrecy.”¹⁰ It can be a terrifying decision, but one way to keep our secrets from becoming vulnerabilities is to make the choice to own up to them. When we acknowledge our secrets and shame, even ones that we harbor tightly within, we can expose them to the light of repentance, and to the healing presence of community. In our electronic lives, information about us has value. We know that that’s true about corporations who want to use that data to sell us goods and services. But it’s also true in the spiritual realm. Allowing other people access to our lives and our selves, letting ourselves become vulnerable, as counter-intuitive as it is, can be surprisingly helpful because it exposes us to accountability and reassurance from other people.

⁹ Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 84.

¹⁰ *Letting Go*, 1962.

In his *Autobiography*, Mark Twain wrote, “When a person cannot deceive himself, the odds are against his being able to deceive other people.”¹¹ Refusing to deceive ourselves means living lives with integrity, being willing to acknowledge who we are, how we are weak, what frightens us, how we fail. It is uncomfortable – but it is an incredibly meaningful way to live. Consciously exposing ourselves to the honest scrutiny of our community means that we give them the opportunity to forgive us – but it also helps us find the courage to forgive others when we might not ordinarily have the motivation to do so. Many of us have difficulty exposing our secrets even to our own family. So what I’m going to propose next will feel a little scary. This year I want you to think about bringing your secrets to this community, to the congregational family and to the Jewish people.

This room is already filled to the rafters with secrets. Hidden secrets, planted over the year that has just ended. Think for a moment about the secrets and the prayers being prayed by people all around us. Imagine all the secrets we have brought with us to this night of prayer and hope and challenge: the most personal secrets we own. Some of us bring the pain of relationships now ended, others the hope of new love. (Some are carrying the hopeful secret that they will bear a child this year; others nurture the secret grief of infertility or miscarriage.) This year a lot of us have lost our jobs. Maybe some of us have managed to find new ones. Maybe we’re kept up at night by fear about an awful medical diagnosis, or by the challenges of addiction and recovery, and maybe we haven’t told anyone about it at all. We come to this place with secrets that paralyze us: about ourselves, about those we love, and about the dreams that we cannot imagine

¹¹ *Autobiography*, 1924.

sharing with another soul. But we have brought them here because God is the knower of secrets, and the best place we can declare that truth is inside a spiritual community.

So this is a challenge and an invitation. Let this be the place you bring your secrets. Bring the ones that cause you pain and bring the ones that we can celebrate with you. Sometimes, when we are alone in the dark at night, we may wonder with a shudder, “What will I do when everyone finds out what I really am?”¹² When we’re part of a supportive spiritual community, we come to know that we can answer that question in the best way possible: “They will love me anyway.”

At our observance of S’lichot last week, guided by our Scholar-in-Residence, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, we took part in an activity that was simultaneously terrifying and inspiring. In place of the traditional recitation of sins that Jewish liturgy suggests we all are guilty of, we heard read a list of regrets that members of our community had written anonymously. [Read examples of cards.] The experience was chilling, because we all noticed the same thing: they are guilty of my secrets; I am guilty of yours. But though all of us are guilty, none of us is alone. Mark Twain got it exactly right. When a person cannot deceive himself, he cannot deceive anyone else. But the opposite is also true: when a person lets go of his urge to deceive others, he can finally let go of his desire to deceive himself.

¹² For more, see the work of sociologist Walter Anderson.

All of us have come here harboring secrets. We carry secrets of dreams deferred, losses suffered, joys unshared. But on this night, for all of us, one of our secrets is the image we hold in our minds when we visualize the better selves we want to become in this new year. That is one of the most tightly-guarded secrets we can come up with. And the worst thing we can do is to kill that secret by refusing to allow it to see the light of day. When we call God “the One who remembers all that has been forgotten,” we know that our best self that exists inside can never cease to be. The presence of God – and of our religious community – will make it known and make it real.

Living in the world that we do, it is unlikely that we will evade electronic scrutiny anytime soon. The simple realities of this world mean that other people’s eyes are on us. And that makes it a strange and radical thing for us to make the conscious choice to place ourselves under the gaze of even more eyes: the eyes of God and of the People Israel.

All of us will always have secrets that we cannot share with the world. But if we are wise, and if we take seriously this season’s challenge for self-reflection, we know that the people sitting around us are the ones who will make it possible for us to remake ourselves into who we are meant to be. I promise you that that is true. And now that you know it, my friends, it is no secret.

May this new year be a year of goodness and growth. Shabbat shalom and shana tova.