"Twittering Torah"
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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I read an interesting article this week – the article in The Forward – America's oldest and greatly endangered Jewish newspaper asked the question – what if Moses had an iPhone on Mt. Sinai? The columnist wondered how that moment and all of subsequent Jewish history would have been different if when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments – instead of inscribing them on stone tablets Moses instead, whipped out his iPhone and quickly sent off a Tweet to his 600,000 Israelite followers on Twitter summarizing God's words in 140 character or less?

A Tweet by the way for those who are blessedly uniformed is a Twitter message – a 140 character text message sent via email, website or cell phone to your friends, family and a whole bunch of people you don't know but who have signed up online to be informed of your every 140 character thought via the social networking site Twitter. Think of a mass email to everyone in your address book – but with only a subject line – that is a Tweet on Twitter.

Twitter – has been getting a lot of attention and press of late – I would say in newspapers – but those are becoming scarcer by the day. It is referred to as micro-blogging and is competing with emails, blogs and Facebook pages as the most popular way to update the world on all that is happening at any given moment in your life. Some have called it the inevitable evolution of American narcissism – the self indulgent assumption that people really want to know the answer to the framing question on Twitter: "What are you doing right now?" While most tweets consist of little more than 140 character updates on what people are having for breakfast, the latest office gossip and pop culture references - it has also been credited with changing the way political campaigns organize their grassroots and in recent days Twitter has even been credited with informing the world about the riots and subsequent crackdown in the aftermath of the Iranian presidential election. Its pretty powerful technology – but like most things one has to ask – is it good for the Jews?

Back to Moses and his iPhone for a moment. My imagination explodes with the idea of every Jew receiving the word of God instantly on their cell phones. Millennium of Hebrew School teachers, not to mention Rabbis have been trying to pass down Torah from one generation to the next - in theory Moses could have done it with the press of a button and a simple text message. Imagine a Rabbi's entire sermon in just 140 characters – you may be praying for just such a thing right now!

But on the other hand what could Moses, a Rabbi or any of us really say in 140 characters or less? If he were going for a literally communication of what God said to him on Mt. Sinai 140 characters is barely enough encompass the first two commandments, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; Do not have any other gods before me." Moses would leave out an awful lot if he tried to relay the word of God within the limits of a text message – indeed commandment number two also involves idols and he ran out of characters before he could mention that – perhaps that would explain the Golden Calf incident?

The great Talmudic Sage Rabbi Hillel – tried it – his famous verse, "Do not do unto others that which you would not have them do unto you. That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary, go and study!" is just 133 characters – including spaces. Some who read this statement surmise that Hillel was trying to simplify Judaism. Indeed because they lack the context in which the question was asked they go so far as to argue that what Hillel was proposing was a new and improved, leaner more accessible Judaism. The greatest example of those who take that position would be the early Christians who re-phrased Hillel's statement in the positive, "Do unto others as you have them do unto you." Called it the Golden Rule and created Christianity as more accessible evolution of Judaism and its complex and enumerable system of commandments and laws. Paul and the Gospels argued rather convincingly for many that the 133 character statement and a faith in Jesus as a personal savior was all that was needed to serve God - indeed the rest was not only commentary but cumbersome – too many words – too much open to interpretation and questions, too many opportunities to fail.

The fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity is not just the belief in a personal Messiah – but the idea that the answer are found in the Torah not by boiling it down to its simplest idea – what the rabbis call *P'shat* but by delving deeper and deeper into its meanings to get to the *Sod* or the foundation, the meaning behind its message.

Judaism is a conversation – it is an ongoing, ever evolving commentary on life and our relationship with the divine. Hillel's statement can never be complete and he knows it – he tells us, the rest is commentary Lech Lamad – Go and study it! We think it is an after thought but its actually his fundamental point.

To understand Hillel's statement just like to understand Torha we need context and the help of commentary. We need to study – to go deeper than 133 characters. So what is the whole story?

The over 140 character version? It is of a man, a Roman soldier who goes first to Hillel's colleague and opposite counterpart Rabbi Shamai. The man asks Shamai to teach him the entire Torah while he stands on one foot. Shamai – uses even less words than Hillel – in fact according to the Talmud he uses no words at all – so offended by the man's presumptive question he take a stick and beats the man – chasing him down the street. The man then goes to Hillel and asks the same question with the same condition of receiving an answer while Hillel stands on one foot. In that context pressed for time and because his nature was more forgiving than Shamai's Hillel answers the man with his now famous Talmudic text message. But then this man, who had already been beaten by one Rabbi is so intrigued by Hillel's statement that he asks, does that mean that all people Jews and Gentiles are brothers? Hillel responds yes that is the meaning of Torah Go and study it? The Soldier replies, when may I come for another lesson – a conversation ensues.

Context and commentary are not only important – they are essential to the Jewish way of life. Without commentary we don't understand why Moses receives the 10 commandments in the first place. Without context we would not have even imagined the circumstances under which Hillel gave his answer while standing on one foot or what happened between them immediately after.

Is Twitter good for the Jews? It is only if it lead to a deeper conversation only if it leads to *Lech Lemad* – go and study. But as in all things – if we don't go deeper, if we just take the first blush, the simple answer, the 140 character statement, the cliff's notes version instead of the novel we miss the point, we miss the message. Its like eating only dessert for dinner – its sweet but there is no sustenance. To which our Tradition has another 140 character statement – *im ayn kemach ayn Torah, im ayn Torha aym Kemach*. Where there is no sustenance there is not Torah and where there is no Torah there is no sustenance – want to know that means? Come and study – Its meaning requires more 140 characters or me standing on one foot.