

# FACEBOOK AND FAKE FRIENDS

*by Rabbi Jason Gelber*

Facebook's Initial Public Offering (IPO) emerged to great fanfare and expectation last week. Many prognosticators predicted a perpetual climb in stock's price, and why wouldn't they? The site hosts over 800 million people in its social media network. On Friday, Facebook was the talk of Wall Street; within several days, the excitement had fizzled, much of the initial zeal exposed as a function of cultural hype. After two days of trading Facebook's stock price was down eighteen percent; the illusion of doubling or tripling values remained precisely that...an illusion. In many ways, not unlike the content of its burgeoning network.

## **Fake Friends**

Facebook accords people the illusion that they have thousands of friends at any given time. By merely commenting on an others' photos, updates, and comments, people fall into the fallacy that they are connecting and building relationships with others in the "cyber world". However, while these tools may be instrumental - helpful supplements to existing relationships - when they serve as the basis of the relationships themselves they create a mirage. Without personal effort and connectedness, human relationships cannot blossom to their potential.

## **Relationship Creatures**

Human beings are relationship beings. The Torah (Nitzavim 15-16) states, "And you can choose life or death, and you should love G-d." The Ibn Ezra explains that this verse describes the purpose of life - to create a loving relationship with our Creator, and by extension, to His manifold creations around us. One who fosters this primary relationship - with the Al-mighty - will never be alone. And one who nurtures its human corollaries will gain the selflessness and compassion essential to our life's mission.

The process works in reverse as well; one who labors in the field of human relationships may find a fertile path to a relationship with the Almighty. Rav Shlomo Wolbe provides a fitting analogy to this

experience: Imagine a person situated in a dark room with all its doors and windows locked. When he opens the window just a crack he can see everything - the heavens and earth. One who is self-centered and absorbed is as if he is locked inside a dark room. The moment he opens his heart to another, he can now see not only his friend, but the world around him - indeed, the Al-mighty - as well.

## **Without Relationships**

Conversely, without relationships we suffer. In today's society the cruelest available punishment in the penal system is solitary confinement. Studies demonstrate that many incarcerated in its depressive environs quickly fade into mental illness and even suicidal tendencies; the pain of disconnection is simply too acute.

The Talmud tells a story of Chonie Hamagel who left his town, only to return decades later to find his grandchildren and their peers studying Torah. He attempted to join them, study with them and relate to them. When, perhaps owing to his absence or the ever-ubiquitous "generation gap," he could connect to them as he wished, Choni grew agitated and cried out, "O' Chavrusa o Misusa"- Either friendship or death!"

## **Addictions**

Much of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step treatment programs stems from this principle as well. Often, a person suffering from addictions feels isolated; illicit substances tend to fill a void, albeit in an artificial or destructive manner. The 12 Steps help them understand that people need real relationships, and provides them with a fellowship, a sponsorship and ultimately a bridge to a Higher power. These new, authentically human relationships can then replace the synthetic ones provided by alcohol or narcotics.

## **Parenting**

Any successful parent understands that the strength of one's relationship to one's child will likely determine the child's emotional health as an adult. Children crave personal connections with their parents; just as healthy foods nourish their growing bodies, healthy relationships nourish their growing hearts and souls. Any superficial substitutes -excessive television, latchkey parenting or other such iterations - can prove detrimental to that process.

Mr. Zuckerberg may have cashed out on his IPO, but the rest of his Facebook friends may be left short changed; unless, that is, they reclaim the glorious world of real, personal relationships, and the Ultimate relationship these can engender.

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