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Freedom from (electronic) slavery

MICAH STREIFFER | MARCH 29, 2018, 8:39 AM |

This year we are slaves; next year may we be free.”

Every year we read those words as part of the Passover Seder, and every year I think, “That’s silly. I’m not a slave.”

But I think I might be.

If slavery means not having complete agency over my actions or control over my time, then I am a slave — not to Pharaoh, but to my electronic device.

I’ll admit it: I check my phone about a thousand times a day. I read emails; I respond to texts; I read articles; I scan Facebook; I look at my bank balance (as if it might be different than an hour ago). When I am bored, I reach for my phone. When my mind wanders, I reach for my phone. During the 15-second interval in which I’m waiting for something to load on my computer, I reach for my phone. Some of what I am doing on my device is productive work, but much of it is not. And either way, it is disjointed, and addictive, and bad for me. A few weeks ago I left my device at home for a few hours, and I *still* kept reaching my hand into my pocket for it every few minutes — even though it wasn’t there! If that isn’t evidence of enslavement, I don’t know what is.

And this enslavement goes beyond my badly truncated attention span and addictive tendencies. 2018’s shocking revelations about social media have shown just how deep our crisis is. We are all, literally, in the control of our devices: algorithms are deciding what news we will read, with whom we will connect, and what content we will be shown. Our data is available to those who would target us for advertisements, track our movements, store information about us, and tamper with our elections. This is true in 2018 in a way that it has never been before. In fact, maybe the Haggadah should read “This year — more than ever — we are slaves.”

I don’t yet know the full solution. I’m not willing (so far) to #deletefacebook, and I don’t want to give up long-distance contact with friends and family. But Pesach is a festival of freedom, and this year I made this pledge: during Seder night, I will unplug. Completely. I will turn off my

device and focus on my family, on enjoying the food and drink in front of me, and on being present in the moment.

I want to be able to say that I am free. And I want to be aware enough to realize it.