ENGAGEMENT THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

By Dr. Gloria Becker, Director, Educational Technology

I remember the first computer I worked on when I started my professional life – a Tandy 4P. It was the portable version of the Tandy 4, running TRS-DOS before MS-DOS or iOS came into being. It weighed 23 pounds and had two 5 ¼" floppy drives. No hard drive, no mouse, no Internet, no Bluetooth, no Facebook, no Twitter. It was just a blinking green screen, a clunky keyboard, and a noisy 9-pin dot matrix printer. The rumor was that, as a company, you would get paid faster and look more professional if your invoices were printed by a dot matrix printer instead of a typewriter. The little dots on the three-part carbonless paper with the sprocket holes proved that you were "at the cutting edge."

We had no idea how our lives would become such open books when we discovered the Internet, social media, miniature cameras, digital recording devices, and wireless technology. We can now connect with people we don't know simply by listening to their very public wireless phone calls. Annoying, isn't it? We get email that isn't always meant for us to see when someone mistakenly hits "reply all." Oops, I've done that myself. Information flies by us at a speed that is dazzling and overwhelming. I often feel "over-connected," as I try to fight through all the electronic static (mortgage deals, cheap medications, and guaranteed weight-loss miracles) to connect to and learn about others and our world on a more "human" scale. A cup of tea and some companionship can be very grounding.

Since 1985, we have worked very hard to integrate technology into every facet of our lives. We even have appliances that order groceries! It is all too easy to let our people skills get rusty. Jewish life is built around people and families. We bring 10 Jews together to pray. We invite three people to our table to say *Birkat Hamazon*, to say the blessings following a meal. We may not feel connected to an organization or institution, but we still yearn to connect with other people. It grounds us.

As the Director of Learning Technologies at Jewish Learning Venture, I am working to bring people and technology together to strengthen the Jewish community. I have two computers on my desk, a PC and a Mac. I carry an iPad and an Android phone. I have wireless headphones to use when I hold webinars and videoconferences. There is very little I can't do from my desk chair – including interact with other people. And yet, I was entrusted to organize a *Yom Limmud*, a day of learning, about family engagement. Family engagement is primarily about creating and supporting relationships, real people-to-people interactions.

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So far there are 259 teachers, educators, clergy, and lay leaders registered to attend on October 27th at Beth Am Israel. They are coming to meet face-to-face with others who still believe that creating and nurturing personal relationships is vital. The health of our community depends on these relationships. And though I will still be carrying a device or two with me, I will be stepping out from behind my computers to meet with colleagues and learn about the importance of personal relationships and the role they play in the Jewish community. It will be nice to have a face to put with that email or Facebook post.

How do you use technology to support the important relationships in your life?