

(Palpable Transition)

This year's Yom Kippur Pop Culture Quiz is about to begin.

Please tell me which television show each of the following quotes comes from:

“You're fired.”

“The tribe has spoken.”

“As you know in fashion – one day you're in, and the next, you're out.”

“This is the true story... of eight strangers... picked to live in a house...work together and have their lives taped... to find out what happens... when people stop being polite... and start getting real...*The Real World*.”

And, last but not least, “Smile! You're on *Candid Camera*.”

These are all, of course, examples of reality television, a genre that is not all that new, but has certainly become an enormous part of our media culture all over the world. Reality TV shows are so pervasive that, not only are they broadcast much of the day, but they even have their own television channels devoted to 24 hours of reality programming.

James Frey, controversial author of *A Million Little Pieces*, assesses the genre appropriately:

“You cannot escape it. You will never escape it.

Try as you may, you will never get away.

Hope as you might, it will never go away.

It's drunk screaming wives flipping tables.

It's brave men on creaky boats complaining about the weather and praying for fish.

It's policemen making arrest after arrest after arrest after arrest.

It's idiotic and banal and makes you hate yourself for watching.

Teenagers spinning out over a first kiss.

Parents with too many children who hate each other.

Hipsters in their early twenties pretending to live normal lives,

men auditioning wives whom they will never marry.

Contestants on an island, in the jungle, in the wilds of China, in the depths of Africa, whoever wins gets a million dollars!

You can't get enough of it, and you can't live without it.”¹

Without realizing it, reality television shows have affected institutional, technological, ethical, and cultural realms.

They show us the best of what humanity can achieve, as well as the worst.

They have redefined the understanding of what is “real,” and have changed the boundaries between public and private.

The various reality shows all have one thing in common:

a “professed ability to more fully provide viewers an unmediated, voyeuristic, and yet often playful look into what might be called the ‘entertaining real.’”²

¹ David, Anna, ed. *Reality Matters*. New York: itbooks, 2010. P. xi.

Reality shows are distinguished from fictional television due to a, “fixation with ‘authentic’ personalities, situations, problems, and narratives [which] is considered to be reality TV’s primary distinction from fictional television and also its primary selling point.”³

They are also, supposedly, unscripted and spontaneous.

Reality Shows are also distinguished from documentaries – though there are noticeable connections to the documentary tradition in media, much of our engagement with reality shows hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains ‘fictional’ elements.”⁴

The adults in the room hopefully understand that some aspects of what we are viewing are fake, scripted, or edited to create a particular narrative.

I wonder how much our children realize this irony.

This inexpensive, increasingly influential and popular segment of our culture has the ability to inspire us to better our lives, and it also has the ability to cause us to ethically devolve and regress.

I have been fascinated by the impact of reality television on our culture, particularly on our understanding of morals and values.

The “Marci” part of me gets sucked in to many of the shows, and sits on the edge of the couch with baited breath

as I wait to see who will win or get eliminated from various shows.

What crazy garment will a *Project Runway* contestant create this week?

What ridiculousness will Snooki perpetrate on *Jersey Shore*?

How will I decide who to vote for this week on *American Idol*???

The “Rabbi” part of me is disturbed by the narcissistic, cruel, and petty behavior that is glorified for all to see and potentially emulate.

I therefore wanted to look into the genre more in depth,

and ponder its ramifications for us as Jews,

especially at a time of year which encourages us to look deeply at our own behavior, values, and relationships.

I wanted to examine the hidden camera shows,

the family-based shows,

the dating shows,

and the do-good shows,

and see what I could learn from these examples of today’s culture.

There are many disagreements about when the reality genre began.

Some argue that it was *Survivor* that started it off in 2000.

Others believe that it was *The Real World* in 1992.

Actually, one of the very first “reality shows” was *Candid Camera*,

² Murray, Susan and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. P. 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7

which was created by Allen Funt and which ran from 1959-1967.

Though such “gotcha!” shows might be considered lowbrow and cheap today, at the time, Funt’s covertly filmed records of real people in unusual situations were a respected and studied form of culture.⁵

Many scholars viewed *Candid Camera* as an important sociological analysis of Post-War America.

Funt’s method was frequently cited or duplicated as a way of teaching responsible forms of citizenship both at home and abroad.

The hidden camera was capable, for the first time, of documenting many of America’s institutions, from the judiciary system to a mental hospital.⁶

Funt’s show was celebrated for being a “privacy-busting truth-teller,” and it was believed to be an arena where popular culture and social science overlapped.⁷

In a 1976 interview with social psychologist Philip Zimbardo, Funt admitted, “I wish I could use *Candid Camera*’s humanness and non-threatening approach to help parents, teachers, or salespeople reexamine what they are doing to learn from their mistakes.”⁸

Though Funt seemed to believe his show satisfied a higher social purpose, direct descendants,

such as *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, *Punk’d* or *Boiling Points*, do not seem to hold any other value other than sensationalism.

Hidden camera shows today capitalize on voyeuristic tendencies within all of us, And they show us people at their most vulnerable, and often on their worst behavior.

We see the face that the subject puts on in controlled settings, and the “real” person inside that comes out when things get stressful.

The first family-based documentary was the PBS series, *An American Family*.

The 1973 project featured the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, and it shared nearly a year of their lives as they unfolded before the lenses of the cameras.

The series led to magazine covers, interviews, satires, and the Loud’s were held up as an emblem for the American family in the early 1970’s.⁹

Surprisingly, the show was quite scandalous – it was viewed by many critics as a manipulative sociological experiment in perpetual surveillance.¹⁰

One might wonder why any family would choose to participate in such a show.

One of the sons, Lance Loud, spoke about his experience in a later interview:

“I remember one of the reasons my family went along with it was that we didn’t even *get* PBS in Santa Barbara.

⁵ McCarthy, Anna. “Stanley Milgram, Allen Funt, and Me.” *Reality TV*, p. 25.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

⁸ Ibid, p. 30.

⁹ Kompare, Derek. “Extraordinarily Ordinary.” *Reality TV*, p. 100.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

We thought it was going to be right up there with a trout fishing TV series. No one imagined it was going to be anything major. And literally, overnight, we went from being, like, normal nerds to much-criticized and nationally-villified nerds.”¹¹ Also interesting is that the show did not spark imitators, despite PBS’s high ratings.¹² This certainly stands in stark contrast to today’s TV families – Jon and Kate, The Osbournes, the Hogans, the Kardashians, etc, who all are more than willing to open up their entire lives to the public eye. Of the families showcased on television, it is maybe only the Osbournes (incredibly enough) who could be held up as a positive example of a loving, functional family. The others only damage the image of how a family should interact with one another, how they should talk to each other, and what is appropriate to be shared outside of the home’s walls. These shows challenge the Jewish value of *Shalom Bayit* – doing what we can to maintain a peaceful home. Part of being a member of a family is learning what is worth ignoring or letting go of, and what is worth a discussion or a confrontation. As my grandmother used to teach me, “If he doesn’t put the seat down or put the cap back on the toothpaste, does it really matter? Is that what is really important in a relationship?” In a family-based reality show, these are exactly the kind of meaningless conflicts which are then exploited for the camera. *Shalom* doesn’t sell well, so it not sought out. The only time *Shalom* did well was on Rabbi Shmuley Boteach’s show, *Shalom in the Home*, in which Rabbi Boteach went into the homes of troubled families and helped them reconcile, rebuild, or heal the family’s emotional wounds. He taught much about respect, love, and values, often slipping Jewish terms or concepts into his teachings.

Then there are the dating shows, the first of which was *The Dating Game*, airing on and off from 1975-1999. *Love Connection* came along in 1983. Dating shows are so tantalizing, and are so perfect for television. They all tried to match individuals through evaluations of the suitors’ responses to silly questions. The shows were light-hearted, happy, and tried to show the best qualities of the potential daters. One would assume that viewers would want to watch true-love blossom before their eyes, but, instead, the television industry learned about the viewer’s capacity to root for an unhappy ending.

¹¹ Andrejevic, Mark. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 69.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 71.

Some of the best episodes included tales of uncomfortable matches, dating disasters, after-the-date He Said/She Said segments, or even the anticipation of such a disaster.¹³

Now, of course, schadenfreude is one of the most sacred aspects of reality TV, but it was still new 30-40 years ago.

Today's dating shows, such as *The Bachelor*, *Rock of Love*, *Temptation Island*, *Parental Control*, and *Next*, give us incredible access into the participants' lives, asking for immediate impressions, reactions, and decisions based on the prospective dates they are meeting.

The shows are heavily scripted and planned in advance.

Both the men and the women on these contemporary shows come off as shallow, superficial, manipulative, and generally out-of-control.

The portrayals of the genders are stereotypical and demeaning.

Why anyone would actually want to date any of these people who really only seem to want their 15 minutes of fame is beyond me.

A sobering reminder of how dating shows can create misogynist representations of relationships is found in a review of *The Bachelor* on one of my favorite websites, the *Internet Movie Database*, or imdb.com.

The reviewer writes,

"I'm still a youngster, and was led to believe that women gradually grew out of their shallowness as they got older and more realistic about their future partner.

This show is proving otherwise."¹⁴

Jewishly, I know that the first commandment in the Torah is to "be fruitful and multiply," and I know that God says, "It is not good for a person to be alone,"

but I have to believe that, as a single woman,

I am a worthy, competent, complete person,

even if I haven't found a husband just yet.

These shows portray single women as being desperate and willing to do anything, even something humiliating, in order to find a mate.

I hope that these shows don't mean that I have no life until I am properly married off,

or that I have to be the kind of woman

who throws all manners and self-respect out the door

just to find a gentleman who would be with little ole' me.

Just when we run the risk of feeling all slimy and dirty from these less-than-angelic shows,

we can turn the channel to one of the many "do-good" shows.

These shows tug at our heartstrings,

show us the power of the human spirit,

¹³ Gray, Jonathan. "Cinderella Burps." *Reality TV*, p. 260.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 275.

and prove a person's capacity to grow and change.

This is also one of the oldest forms of Reality TV.

Shows like *Queen for a Day*, which began in 1945,

Strike it Rich, in 1947, and *The Big Payoff*, in 1951,

were televised competitions based on personal hardship.¹⁵

The person who was worst off was the “winner,” so to speak.

The audience would vote on who would win new appliances, vacations,

or other items that were sponsored by advertisers.

Today, I think of similar shows like *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*,

The Biggest Loser, *Undercover Boss*, *Intervention*, and *Hoarders*.

We get a glimpse into someone's life,

the someone hopefully having a much worse life than ours,

which gives us a chance to feel better about our own trials and tribulations.

We watch the production swoop in,

provide tools and lessons which hope to improve the person's life,

and we all eagerly await word that the show's subject

will accept help, learn, evolve, and come away better than before.

These shows have a varied success rate with the people they help,

and some have questionable ethics.

Extreme Makeover and *Undercover Boss* are beautiful, meaningful, and important shows.

I truly enjoy them, and I feel that they actually provide an important social service.

Extreme Makeover gives a family a new home or much needed renovations,

much in line with Abraham Maslow's pyramid of basic needs –

without a safe, secure home in which to live,

how are we to aspire for anything greater than simple survival?

Undercover Boss features one boss, CEO, Owner,

or other top executive of a major corporation

who goes undercover within many departments in his/her company.

They meet the regular folks who make their businesses run,

Such as the maintenance workers, telephone operators, stockboys, and more.

They are able to appreciate the hard work that people give to their company,

they learn their life stories,

and build new relationships with all levels of employee.

Intervention, *Hoarders*, and *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew* are powerful shows that have the potential to help many.

These shows highlight specific illnesses or addictions,

and take the viewer through an attempt at helping the sufferer find a way out of his/her situation.

Critics are very mixed about these shows, as am I –

are they educating viewers and helping the subject of each show,

or are they exploiting real disorders for public entertainment?

The Biggest Loser and other weight-loss shows have been extremely controversial,

as they have been exposed as fostering very unhealthy habits and even creating eating disorders

in order to ensure the proper level of drama,

¹⁵ Watts, Amber. “Melancholy, Merit, and Merchandise.” *Reality TV*. P. 302.

the required weekly weight loss, and the best ratings. Previous contestants have later come forward, admitting to starving themselves or exercising obsessively in order to win. The behavior necessary to be successful on the show is not possible nor is it in any way healthy, and the show creates unrealistic expectations about timelines and the ability to maintain weight loss long term, as well as encouraging body dysmorphia.

These do-good shows have many benefits – we are encouraged to be charitable and giving to others, and we are shown how possible it is to change our lives with the right guides, support network, tools, and motivation. We gain a view at the world around us and at those who we may not encounter in our own daily lives. Nonetheless, I have two serious concerns with these shows – First, does viewing them unconsciously give us a false sense of having helped someone? Do we then feel absolved of performing an act of tikkun olam or doing a mitzvah because we have watched something inspiring on television? Does donating annually to an episode of *American Idol Gives Back*, while important, remove our responsibility for daily mitzvot that Judaism requires of us? My second concern is that these shows have the potential to make us feel that it isn't possible to change our lives unless it takes place in the public eye. We can't settle a family dispute without turning to Dr. Phil. We can't face an addiction without going to a fancy rehab facility like Dr. Drew's. We can't attempt to lose weight on our own – we need to be on a reality show to make it work.

The next reality show phase will probably be very *Truman Show*-esque. Actor Seth Green is actively creating a new web series that will allow viewers to vote on every single aspect of a chosen subject's life, from what to wear in the morning to who to date.¹⁶ Who knows where these types of shows will take us!

My most favorite reality show is one with a very important twist. I don't know if you have caught the two seasons of the show, *True Beauty*¹⁷, but it seems to be a response to the more negative behaviors generated by the reality shows of the last ten years. Contestants on this reality show believe that they are competing based on outer beauty. This past season was looking for the "New Face of Las Vegas." The participants live together, compete in a number of contests, like filming a commercial for Vegas, and one gets eliminated each week. They THINK that they are eliminated based on their success or failure in the week's challenge. However, what they don't know is that they are being watched at all times by the judges, and that they are actually being judged based on their overall behavior.

¹⁶ <http://television.gearlive.com/tvenvy/article/q107-seth-green-to-give-viewers-true-control/>

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Beauty_%28TV_series%29

Each week, someone who has been unkind, cruel, unethical, or who has broken the show's rules is brought before the judges and shown clips of their behavior.

They are shocked by the revelation of the show's true nature, and by the clear, visual evidence of their actions before their very eyes.

The person who wins the show is therefore the nicest, most cooperative, and most ethical contestant.

True Beauty was my ultimate inspiration for this morning's sermon.

This show, and really every reality show, encourages us, explicitly or implicitly,

To wonder:

How we would act under those circumstances?

If we were secretly being watched, what would the cameras see?

Gossip? Insults? Underhandedness?

Kindness? Altruism? Love and devotion?

Many of us in today's world are practically the stars of our own reality shows,

Thanks to the thousands of surveillance cameras that record our lives,

And especially thanks to social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

We are able to share the minutiae of our lives with our online friends,

And this isn't always a bad thing,

But it is not necessarily an honest thing.

Just as the producers of the shows edit for the best ratings,

We edit what we put online in order to project a certain persona.

I'm not encouraging you to write anything embarrassing or negative,

Rather, I'm asking you to consider what happens between each post,

Between our moments in the public eye,

When we are behind closed doors,

When we don't think anyone is watching.

There is a judge, watching our behavior.

Some may prefer to think of that judge as God.

Others might prefer the image of the divine spark within.

Our souls know right from wrong.

We have a sense of morality and how to best treat others in our lives.

Hopefully, we have not made it a habit of throwing tables upside down when we get angry.

Hopefully, we do not immediately call someone names and start tearing out their hair in a catfight when we are a bit peeved with him or her.

We should seek out relationships built on solid foundations,

Not built on how fun someone is in the hot tub.

We should volunteer for organizations like Habitat for Humanity or URJ's Adult Mitzvah Corps, Instead of watching a television show do the mitzvah for us.

We should reach out to those in our lives who need support with

Mental illness, addiction, or trauma, and help them work towards recovery,

Instead of just watching strangers struggle on tv.

We should get out into the world and do good deeds,

Instead of just sitting in our protective, isolated living rooms and letting others do them for us.

We don't need Reality Shows to show us our moral or ethical core.

We don't need Reality Shows to tell us what is real or what is true.

We know.

We should, instead, listen for that quiet yet strong voice
within that knows exactly the right way to treat ourselves, our family members,
our friends, our coworkers, and others.

Each time we listen to that small voice, deep within us,

And we act on its knowledge, it is strengthened.

We must allow that voice to grow louder and more powerful.

And it even becomes easier to hear.

We know, even when we don't want to admit it,

how to live with integrity,

even when no one is watching or reading our latest post.

Tomorrow morning, we will read from Torah portion, *Nitzavim*.

In it, God gives us a choice – between life and death, between blessing and curse.

Yom Kippur forces us to confront that choice,

To decide what choice we will make this year.

What will you choose?

I pray that we all choose wisely,

Even when we won't receive recognition,

Even when we won't receive applause,

Even when we won't get caught,

Even when no one, but God, is watching.

Amen.