

## Take a Break

*Rosh Hashana Evening 2008  
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

There was a scandal in New York a few months ago that you may or may not have heard about. No, not the one with the governor, and not the one on Wall Street - I'm talking about the "great sushi scandal".

A couple of high school kids did an experiment for a science class project on the sushi in a number of expensive high class restaurants. Based on a DNA analysis of 60 samples of seafood from four restaurants and ten stores, they claim that perhaps as much as one fourth of the fish for sale in New York City markets and sushi restaurants might be mislabeled, and that cheap fish is presented as more fancy allowing the merchants to charge more.

It is surprising how much publicity their experiment generated, because their sample was so limited. Nevertheless their study created quite a fuss. To the response of one chef who tried to belittle the analysis by saying that "It is impossible to mislead people who have knowledge," Edward Dolnick wrote an op ed piece in the New York Times. He countered that the ideal victim for a scam artist is an expert, not the novice. As a famous magician once put it, "when you're certain you cannot be fooled, you become easy to fool." The problem is one of overconfidence.

Sometimes we can be too sure of ourselves. The High Holidays, a time of judgment and self reflection impose upon us a dose of humility. When we pray and stand before God we come face to face with our shortcomings. It is kind of like an annual tune-up. And in this day and age, we can all use a little humility, as well as an annual check-up.

Not too long ago, I was in Times Square. I remember when I was a little boy and loved to marvel at the most prominent billboard, the smoke rings for Camel cigarettes. Nowadays, it is so packed and cluttered with advertisements screaming and competing for our attention, it is a visual hodgepodge and potpourri of visual clutter jumping out at us. In many respects, Times Square is a metaphor for life itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is difficult for us to concentrate and focus on just one thing.

We crave visual stimulation, preferably multiple images flashed in short doses and rapid succession. If we are not multi-tasking we feel we are underperforming and not maximizing our time. We are so addicted to our various devices, that it is no wonder that we are a generation where ADD is the most prominent symptom of a society that is always on the move and cannot seem to stand still.

People on vacation take their blackberries with them so as not to miss that important message from the office. The desire to achieve the maximum level of productivity leads us to always be connected. To some degree, we are afraid not to be connected, for it is a measure of our self-worth and sense of importance. As Perry Glasser wrote sarcastically in an article about this topic in The Wall Street Journal, "Suppose a crucial e-mail was sent while you foolishly wasted time with your kids, sat in the sun, or read a book?"

I am as guilty of this as anyone. While on vacation recently, I checked my treo more than I care to admit, rationalizing that I was just saving myself from a backlog when I returned to the office.

I would venture to guess that just about everyone here tonight has a cell phone, uses email and the internet. But the real question is not do we know how to use it, but do we know how to turn it off?

One of my concerns is that we have become so attached to our palms and hand held devices that we cannot live without them. We text when we drive. With tragic consequences, just two weeks ago, a conductor was sending a text message while conducting a train. And there are those who may even read and send text messages while in services.

Listen to this description from a colleague who is a friend of mine, "I was trying to daven the other day. First, the telephone rang. And since there was no one else home, and I had just started to daven, I answered it. It turned out to be a marketer who was trying to sell me some waterfront property in Virginia. I hung up as quickly as I could, but I was distracted, so distracted that I couldn't remember where I had left off. And so I began my davening all over again. A minute later, an idea came into my mind for a sermon that I have been thinking about for a long time. I did not want to forget it, so I stopped davening, looked for a piece of paper and a pen and jotted it down. And then I tried to go back to davening again.

"I was davening in my study, which is where my computer is located, and that reminded me that there was a very important message that I had been waiting for, and so---shame on me---I went on line and checked to see if it had come in yet. It hadn't, but while I was on line, I noticed that that there were five or six other messages that had come in since I was last on line, so I checked to see if they were important too---it shouldn't be a total loss. I came back to my davening, but a few minutes later, I happened to look out the window, and I noticed that there was a car stopped in my driveway. I wasn't sure if it was someone using my driveway for a u-turn or if it was the neighborhood robber. I found myself watching the car and then I reminded myself and tried to get back to davening."

And that was a rabbi, trying to recite his morning prayers!

We are so in touch that we are out of touch. We are so connected, we have lost any real possibility of meaningful connection with others. Have you ever watched your kids IM - instant message? They carry on numerous conversations simultaneously. Kids prefer to have 1,000 virtual electronic friends on FaceBook rather than 3 real friends with whom they can spend time, laugh and talk to. Is it a fear of intimacy?

So what are we to do about this increasing alienation?

Not surprisingly, I would like to suggest that Judaism has a remedy.

First and foremost, as I have urged you before -- observe Shabbat as a day of rest, a day of family, a day of renewal, a day spent in community and communion, a day of

holiness. I shut down my email Friday afternoon and do not open or read it until after Shabbat.

Christopher Ringwald, in his historical book about the Sabbath entitled A Day Apart notes that taking a day of rest protects us from ourselves, “from our urge to always be doing, improving, earning, getting, spending, having, consuming – all the ways we hurry on toward death.”

The second solution suggested by Judaism is prayer, but not just any kind of prayer, meaningful prayer.

Too often we just read words on a page. This can create a situation where we have communal reading, but not communal prayer. Rabbi Yohanan in the second century said that he prepared for his prayer by spending an hour getting ready for it.

It means shutting out other distractions. One time during services a number of years ago a cell phone started to ring, and the sound was coming from directly in front of me. A woman in the second row proceeded to take the phone out of her bag, and then took the call. She started talking on the phone right in front of me, and not only did she take the call, she wasn't even embarrassed.

With the latest innovations, in addition to getting calls, people can text and check their email while davening. To do so obviously destroys the possibility of being able to truly pray or appreciate the moment. That is why I suggest that the best way to resist the temptation is to not bring them with you into services, or even better yet, turn them off altogether on Shabbat.

Before our b'nai mitzvah and their families enter the sanctuary for the bar mitzvah service, I meet with them in the Chapel. Among other things, I tell them one word. That word is kavannah. I explain to them that it means concentration, focus, spirituality, devotion, directing one's thoughts, intention. It means all this and more, including bringing intensity, passion and commitment to our devotion and actions. Disconnecting from the outside world and other distractions allow a person to be totally present and thereby appreciate the moment and what they may otherwise overlook.

The other night as I was working on my holiday sermons, I had the television on in the background. (See what I mean. I told you I am as guilty as everyone else.) I heard a friend of John Denver tell a story about a time when he heard him give what he thought was the best concert he had ever heard him sing. Later that night when he told his friend what he felt, John Denver said that for whatever reason that particular night he focused more than usual on each word as he pronounced it. He tried to conjure up in his mind the image of whatever word he sang. So when he pronounced the word “cloud” he pictured a cloud, and truly sang each word with meaning in a way he had never done before – and it was noticed, and made a difference.

That is what it means to have true kavanah.

Finally, if making Shabbat or tefillah a regular part of your lives is too difficult, then at least try it once a year. During the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur holidays try turning

off your television and electronic devices. Shutting out the clutter in our lives will allow us to heed the summons of these days. It will allow us to connect to our heritage, with each other, our friends, our family, our inner selves, our inner voice, and our loved ones.

This past year a book entitled, [A Year of Living Biblically](#) tells of one man's efforts to follow thoroughly the bible in his daily life. I read an article about a woman who has decided to spend the year following Oprah Winfrey's advice, and do everything she recommends for a whole year.

While it would be great to follow the advice and way of Judaism every day of the year, tonight I am suggesting we start with something much less ambitious.

The High Holidays remind us we can't just go through the motions of life. It is a gift given to us once a year. My message tonight on this eve of a new year therefore is for us to use this time well. Strive for kavanah. On the holiday - tonight, tomorrow and Wednesday, liberate yourselves from your dependence on your electronic devices. Take a break from your computers, cell phones, faxes, blackberries, palms, treos, emails, facebook, instant messaging, television news. You will be better off. (pun)

And while you are praying, don't just read the prayers. Listen to what the liturgy calls upon us to consider. Listen to the sound of the shofar - I mean, truly listen to it. Let it awaken us from our complacency. Don't just focus on the words, focus on the work. The whole purpose of doing all this is to remind us what we need to do to be better people.

Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch once asked one of his followers what he does before prayer. He answered, "I meditate on the majesty of God." He then asked him, "What do you think about while you are praying?" He told his rebbe, "I think about the greatness of God, and during the shema I concentrate on the oneness and unity of God."

Imagine the surprise when the master then told his disciple, "If you are so absorbed in thinking about God, when do you have time for self-examination?" In other words, while meditating about God is important, we must be careful not to use this as an excuse to avoid the difficult task of our obligation to examine ourselves in the days ahead.

May you and your families be inscribed for a good year in the book of life.

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## Suggested Discussion Questions for the New Year

How can our dependence on modern devices originally intended to make our lives easier be an impediment to true communication? How can our addiction to them prevent us from appreciating the message of the High Holidays?

How can eliminating outside stimuli during the holiday help us to focus on the work we are called upon to do during the Ten Days of Repentance, also known as the Days of Awe?

In what ways can the concept of kavanah be applied to situations other than prayer?

Have you ever had any moments, or experiences where you achieved a true level of kavanah (focus)?

What specific steps can we take to achieve what the rabbi is suggesting that we do, and why should we bother to do so?

What message do I want to try to take away from the holidays?