

Rosh Hashanah 5786/2025**Rabbi Benjy Forester**

The writer James Williams, not to be confused with the psychologist William James, points out the following fact: Axes existed for 1.2 million years before anyone thought to put a handle on them. Eventually, it dawned on someone to do so, making axes both safer and more efficient.

The same James Williams began his career at Google, where he won the Founder's Award, the company's highest honor, for his work creating their systems for effective advertising. His work understood how human attention could be harnessed and directed in order to profit his and other major corporations. He learned how to monetize our minds like nobody had before.

One day, he asked a room full of his colleagues whether they wanted to live in the world that they were creating. Nobody raised their hand. He realized then, that their goals were not only *misaligned* with goals of human flourishing, they were *counter* to them. The more time people spent enmeshed in the systems they were developing, the less time they spent attending to family, hobbies, and tasks.

He left Google, and has devoted his career ever since to researching and writing about the dangers of the attention economy we live in. In other words, he has sought to put a handle on the axe he helped create, even though so much damage had already been done.

I, like I imagine many of you, rely on Google, and Facebook, and Amazon. I use them daily to access information and to complete tasks. They've become indispensable to my daily life. So I hear Williams' caution away from Google, but I also feel that I must follow the pull towards it.

But then I sat to begin writing this sermon, and I realized that I had no fewer than 10 tabs open on my computer. Some were relevant to the sermon, but many weren't. While trying to *begin* the sermon, I booked a flight to a wedding - including researching how to travel with a baby. I glanced at the news. I responded to a work email. In fact, I had both Gmail and Outlook open, not to mention iMessages and Whatsapp. And all of the above were also accessible on the phone that sat directly next to my laptop.

I realized then and there that this Rosh Hashanah, I needed to talk about attention.

This topic isn't new, but the problem is only getting worse. The decline in our attention, correlated with the rise of devices and social media, is already two decades old. However, the patterns have only become more entrenched, and the consequences more extreme. We are lonelier, more anxious, and more divided than ever before. And a common culprit in all of these social ills is the assault on our attention.

So I think it's time we finally pay some real attention to our attention.

According to one researcher, our attention span was 2 and a half minutes in 2004. By 2012 it had shrunk to 75 seconds. In the last few years, that number has decreased to somewhere in the 40s. Statistically speaking, you were already distracted by the time I finished my second paragraph.

Different languages have different ways of describing the way we deploy our attention.

In Russian, attention is something you turn yourself to. I love this framing in this season of teshuva, of turning and returning, of aligning ourselves with our highest values and vision.

In Spanish, attention is something you lend, and in German it is something that you gift. Attention is prosocial and generous, a way of giving from ourselves to others. Attention is a supreme gesture of selflessness.

But in English, attention is something you pay. Every time we focus and refocus our gaze, an imaginary banker descends and says "pay up."

And as we learned from James Williams, formerly of Google, each of our devices is like an attention tollbooth. Each time we enter, we pay the price.

In our world today, our attention is under assault. In the attention economy, we are out of cash and we've maxed out our credit. I'd argue we've actually been robbed: our attention is constantly being stolen away.

In contrast with the English phrasing of paying attention - and even distinct from the Russian, Spanish, and German forms that we saw before - Hebrew has an entirely different understanding of attention.

In Hebrew we don't say "pay attention." We say, "Lasim Lev." This translates literally as to place our heart upon the matter.

Put this way, attention is not a commodity to spend - or to have stolen from us - it's a posture to assume. Energy goes where attention flows. Where we direct our gaze, where we invest our energy, where we focus our thoughts - these are all expressions of the heart.

The American poet J.D. McClatchy captures this sentiment so beautifully. He says that "love is the quality of attention we pay to things."

When we think of attention as an act of *Lasim Lev*, of placing our hearts, we realize just how much is lost in our world of attention assault. Our hearts themselves have been worn down, making us less curious, less compassionate, less creative, less connected.

When I think of my own life, it is one thing to try to write a sermon while doing 10 other things. It is another when I am sitting on the playmat with my 6-month-old, and I find my eyes and my thumbs gravitating to my iPhone. That is lost time with my child, but it is also damaging for his early sense of connection. When I'm not able *lasim lev*, to put my full heart towards my son when I'm with him, he and I are both the worse for it.

As I've just been honest with you, I want to challenge you to be honest with yourselves about the ways that you get distracted, that are a detriment both to you and to the people around you.

Is this the world we want to be living in?

There's an understanding advanced by the Rambam and other great sages that it is better to give a single dollar to one hundred different needy people, as opposed to giving \$100 to one person, because the act of *giving to many* will cultivate the ways of the heart. It will build up the muscles of compassion. The opposite is true of attention. If we direct our heart to 100 places at once, we deplete the muscles of compassion. Attending to one place with full focus will actually more effectively and more sustainably train the muscles of our mind and our heart.

Dr Amishi Jha, author of the book "Peak Mind," has compared attention to a flashlight. When we wave it frantically around, we might think we'd then be able to illuminate the whole room at once. But what we're actually doing is creating a frenzied techno rave in our mind, in which we can't really think straight or see anything clearly at all.

Dividing our attention between many synchronous tasks and tabs is like trying to focus our eyes in many places at the same time. It's no wonder we feel cross-eyed and dizzy.

The internet was launched as a new frontier for democracy. It was decentralized and unregulated. Every voice could weigh in. But it has been colonized by corporations who have turned it into what Williams calls “a large-scale industrial system for persuasion.” The famed social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has sounded the same alarm against what he describes as attention-fracking: breaking down content into small and alarming bits that pull us in, while at the same time breaking down our facility for sustained attention. This leads us further down our echo chambers and leads to polarization and the slow erosion of our civil society. Our eyes and hearts are being led astray.

Attention is our most precious resource, but it is constantly being hacked, fracked, and hijacked.

James Williams, that same former Google executive turned attention-economy-agitator, warns us as follows: “What do we pay when we ‘pay’ attention’ to our devices all the time? We pay [for our] attention with the lives we might have lived.”

The lives we might have lived. This is a message for us to consider as we come together for these high holy days.

On Rosh Hashanah, we gather to evaluate the lives we have lived, and to hold them up against the lives we might have lived. And, we position our hearts and minds to pursue the lives we *aim* to live. This is the work of Cheshbon Nefesh, of taking an accounting of our souls and our lives. We gather together to take back our attention.

Attention is core to the Rosh Hashanah experience.

Our main ritual is blowing the shofar, understood by our rabbis as summoning our attention. In fact, the Mishnah teaches that if someone happens to walk by a synagogue and hears a Shofar blast, they only fulfill their obligation if they כיון לבו - if they incline their heart. If they actually stop and pay attention.

You’ll notice that the book you’re holding is called Machzor Lev Shalem - the prayer book for the full HEART. Our prayers today are meant to help us lasim lev - to focus our attention and to open our hearts.

We begin our first day Torah reading with attention וְה' פָּקַד אֶת־שָׂרָה כְּאִשָּׁר אָמַר – God took note of Sarah as God had stated.

God took note. Jewish history is born of that loving gesture of attention.

And we see the lives of two children - Ishmael and Isaac - saved because their parents opened their eyes and finally paid attention to what was in front of them all along.

Hagar opened her eyes and saw a well to save her son.

Abraham opened his eyes and saw a ram *that was there all along*. Pirkei Avot even suggests that the ram had been there since creation, waiting for its moment. But for its moment to arrive, Abraham had to look up. He had to pay attention. Abraham names the site Adonai-yireh, which means that on this mountain of God, there is vision.

That site is where the Jewish people would later build their holy Temple. It is where we face in prayer to this day. It is a shrine in memory to the power of attention.

And the core declaration of Jewish faith - Shema Yisrael - Jonathan Sacks translates as "Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of God your most focused attention."

Our declaration of faith and identity affirms God's call to us to be a people who can summon the strength to pay attention. Lasim Lev. To know where to place our hearts.

This year, I want to challenge us all to commit together to combatting the assault on our attention.

This is a systemic problem and it requires system solutions. Until there are policies that restrain the technologies responsible, we will remain vulnerable to their influence.

However, there are things we can do as individuals.

I want you to take an attention pledge with me. A commitment Lasim Lev - to reclaim where we place our hearts.

And as I shared - I am giving this sermon not because I have any moral high ground here. We are all in this together.

Here's what I'm thinking: Can anyone relate to the blissful feeling of being on a plane and watching our phones - and therefore our brains - get less noisy, once we switch on airplane mode? Maybe we pull out the book we've been meaning to read, finally without distraction?

How do we *capture* that feeling and *replicate* it here on the ground, in the flow of our lives?

Let me introduce a wonderful concept to you. It's called Shabbat.

And before you laugh at me for such a trite sounding suggestion - *who would have thunk, a rabbi promoting Shabbat!* - please know that I am completely serious. Shabbat is the antidote we are looking for, and like the ram in the binding of Isaac, it's been right in front of us all along. If only we'd open our eyes and our hearts.

Our attention economy makes us less focused, more enslaved to technology, less connected with community, family, and friends. So could you imagine a day that says put down your phone, have a meal with those you love, spend time in prayer and meditation, take a nap, take a walk, play a board game. You may think I'm describing some theoretical pipedream, or the vacation you take once a year. But every single week, this day exists. If only we'd lasim lev, if only we'd orient our hearts towards it.

For all my attentional vices, on Shabbat I really get it right. When I sit on the playmat with my son without any distraction, we laugh, we make eye contact, I sing him songs. Shabbat is a developmental accelerant for my son, but as importantly, it fills our hearts and our souls. At least I know it does for me.

Shabbat practices are organized into two categories: the do's and the don'ts. The do's are things we add on Shabbat that we don't do on any other day, like lighting candles. The don'ts are things we refrain from on Shabbat, like doing business.

I want to advise everyone here to take an attention pledge with me, in which we commit to one "do" and one "don't" in the area of attention. And they might be goals that could take place on Shabbat, or they could be ways of infusing the spirit of Shabbat into the rest of the week.

If you say, great, I will start meditating for an hour a day and keeping a full shomer shabbat lifestyle, best of luck, but don't count on showing up to Rosh Hashanah next year having stuck with it.

We need goals that are realistic and incremental.

So for example: Could you take 3 minutes a day to meditate or 10 minutes to go for a walk? Could you designate 30 minutes in the late afternoon on weekdays for social media consumption, but then limit your usage outside of that window? Could you refrain from work emails or social media entirely for 25 hours each Shabbat? And save 30 minutes in the evening for reading a book? Could you remove your cell phone from your

nightstand? Could you take time to light the candles on Friday night, no matter how busy the week?

Choose just one goal and stick with it. Make a plan for how to implement it. The time that you will reclaim, regardless of the day of the week, will be kadosh, truly sacred.

If we do this, if we each take this attention pledge together, it will improve our lives, our relationships, and even our democracy. Once we train ourselves to overcome the polarizing torrent of clickbait, we'll begin to quiet the loudest and angriest voices that currently claim our attention.

Putting a handle on the axe is an important step, but putting the axe down altogether, even for a little, is the real goal. We have the tools to put down our tools right here in our own tradition. Lasim lev, to align our hearts with what is holy and good. If only we'd open our eyes, and just pay attention.

L'Shanah tovah.