



Rosh Hashanah 5783: Spotlight, Starlight, Daylight Rabbi Grushcow

I lost my keys again this year. I've told you a similar story before, I know – because one of you was kind enough to get me a War Amps tag after a previous sermon. This year upped the ante. I lost them for long enough that I had to concede and replace everything. “No big deal,” I told Shelley, my wife. “Have you ever had to replace electronic car keys before?” she asked. “How bad could it be?” I replied. Friends, it was bad.

We decided to invest in AirTags. And so it was, that one morning over the summer, I parked my car two blocks from here, walked into Temple, and went to unlock my office door only to discover that I didn't have my keys. “Don't panic,” I thought to myself. “I managed to drive here, the key can't be far off.” Then – “Panic!” I thought to myself. “What if I left the keys in the car, and someone is driving it away right now?” I raced back to the car – and remembered the AirTag. So, I called Shelley, queen of all things technical, and asked her how to use my phone to find my keys. Have I mentioned she is a very patient woman? Soon enough I was following a little map on my phone which took my back to Temple, back to my office, and all the way... to the office fridge, where I had left the keys when I put in my lunch.

Leaving keys in the fridge is not generally a good sign. But I was comforted by neuroscientist Lisa Genova's insights in her book, *Remember*. “Most of what we forget is not a failure of character, a symptom of disease, or even a reasonable cause for fear – places most of us tend to go when memory fails us.” Rather, she writes:

...attention is essential for creating a memory for anything. If you don't pay attention to where you park your car in the mall garage, you'll struggle to find it later, but not because you've forgotten where you parked. You have forgotten nothing. Without adding your attention, you never formed a memory for where you parked in the first place.”¹

I didn't forget where I put my keys. I just hadn't paid attention in the first place.

Pay attention. It's a strange phrase, if you pay attention to it. Linguist Aviya Kushner shares a list of how it translates into different languages:

In English, attention is something we pay.
In Spanish, attention is something we lend.
In French, attention is something we make.
And in Farsi, attention is something we do.
...In Russian, attention is something you turn.
In Vietnamese, attention is something you look.

¹ Lisa Genova, *Remember: The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting* (Easton, PA, 2021), pp.15-16.

In Finnish, attention is something we attach.²

And then she writes:

In Hebrew, “to pay attention” is generally *lasim lev*, or “to set your heart to it.” ...What fascinated me, the more I thought about it, is how attention in Hebrew is a matter of the body — but most specifically a matter of the heart.

I love this. Speaking about attention as something that we pay is like speaking about time as something that we spend, and it’s true that there are limited qualities of both. But the Hebrew phrase – set your heart – reminds us that where we put our attention and time says something, or ought to, about where we put our hearts.

שִׁימוּ לְבַבְכֶם עַל-דַּרְכֵיכֶם, the prophet Haggai proclaims, four times in the two brief chapters of his book.³ Haggai is an obscure prophet; I had never studied his writing before we came to it in our Shabbat morning study this summer. But that line jumped out at me. Pay attention to where you are going. Set your heart on your path.

Easier said than done. Author Johann Hari, in a conversation with Ezra Klein about his latest book, *Stolen Focus*,⁴ notes: “I remember at the start of Covid, loads of people... saying to me, oh, we’re going to be locked in. I’m going to finally read Tolstoy. I’m going to learn French on Duolingo.” “Remember the whole thing about how Newton invented calculus during quarantine?” Ezra Klein asks. “Yeah,” Hari replies, “Shakespeare wrote King Lear during a plague... Sadly, I did not write King Lear... no one read Tolstoy and no one learned French, right? People googling, how do I get my brain to work, went up by more than 300 percent.”⁵

I suspect I’m not the only one putting my keys in the fridge.

Paying attention feels especially hard these days. Hypervigilance, decision fatigue, take your pick of explanation. The rabbis called this *trayfe da’at*, “a torn mind – a mind pulled in various directions.”⁶ The good news and the bad news is: this isn’t a new problem.

Here’s the really good news: You picked the right day to be here. Rosh Hashanah is all about paying attention. Almost a thousand years ago, Maimonides put words to the call of the shofar. “It is as if,” he writes, “the shofar is saying:”

Wake up! Look at what you’re doing, and return to who you want to be. Remember that you are made for a purpose, because it’s too easy to lose track of what’s true amidst all the busyness of life, and that’s not what ultimately matters. Be mindful of your inner life,

² Aviya Kushner, “Why We Must Pay Attention to What ‘Pay Attention’ Means,” *The Forward*, October 25, 2018, <https://forward.com/culture/412551/why-we-must-pay-attention-to-what-pay-attention-means/>.

³ Haggai 1:5, 7, 2:15, 18.

⁴ Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can’t Pay Attention – and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York: 2022).

⁵ The Ezra Klein Show, “Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Johann Hari,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-johann-hari.html>.

⁶ Alan Lew, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (Boston, 2003), pp.78-80.

and make better choices in the world, because it's too easy to get stuck on dead-end paths and in destructive thoughts.⁷

Pay attention – *simu lev*. But not just so that you don't lose your keys.

A while back, I was being introduced to someone as follows: "This is Rabbi Grushcow. You might have seen her walking in the neighbourhood. She's always..." I started finishing the sentence in my mind. "Making connections in the community?" "Helping old ladies cross the street?" I was listening closely. "She's always... on her phone."

Ouch. Now, I could be reading the news or a book, catching up on email, trying to guess the Wordle or yes, scrolling on Facebook – but whatever I'm doing, I'm looking down. The question is, is that really where I want my attention to go, in the few moments I have walking outside? Is that where I want to set my heart?

Back to Johann Hari. He introduces us to a former Google strategist named Dr. James Williams, who quit to sound the alarm about how technology is designed to take our attention. "What do you pay when you pay attention?" he asks.

You pay with all the things you could have attended to, but didn't... You pay for that extra Game of Thrones episode with the heart-to-heart talk you could have had with your anxious child. You pay for that extra hour on social media with the sleep you didn't get and the fresh feeling you didn't have the next morning. You pay for giving in to that outrage-inducing piece of clickbait about that politician you hate with the patience and empathy it took from you... We pay attention with the lives we might have lived.⁸

Williams argues that there are three areas of attention – and three areas of potential loss. The first is spotlight attention – the attention required for narrow focus on an immediate task. Say, finding your keys. Or, taking part in this service. I want to tell you something. Last year, when we re-opened the Sanctuary for High Holy Days and a few people came, it was almost lonelier than the first year when everyone was home. Why? Because it is a very strange feeling to be up on this bima, watching you watching the screens. That's why we decided, this year, to limit how we use the sanctuary screens. We know that we look great in close-up – or at least Joseph Kaiser does. But if you're here in person, we would rather have what happens between us. Attention is precious. It may not be physically tangible, but we can feel when it is there.

The second is starlight attention. This is the attention we need for our longer-term goals. It is what orients us to who we hope to be or what we hope to achieve: writing a book, setting up a business, being a good parent. "[I]t's called your starlight," Hari says, "because when you feel lost in the desert, say, you look up to the stars and you remember the direction you're traveling in."⁹

Reading this, I thought of Adel Walidie, the Bedouin guide with whom our Temple group experienced the Negev desert on our Israel trip, before the world shut down.¹⁰ Adel and I spoke

⁷ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 3:4, translation mine.

⁸ James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light* (Cambridge, 2018), p.45. (Full text available as an open source PDF: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/stand-out-of-our-light/3F8D7BA2C0FE3A7126A4D9B73A89415D>).

⁹ This quote is taken from the Hari's interview with Ezra Klein, but Williams' types of attention are also discussed in Hari, *Stolen Focus*, pp.265-67, and Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light*, pp.50-84.

¹⁰ Walidie owns and operates Ben Midbar, <https://www.benmidbar.com/>.

about how many religions begin in the desert; of how being somewhere so open and big can give you a sense of your own smallness, but also a sense of purpose and direction. “Technological tools can’t make you understand where you are, in the deeper sense: to know how to listen, to focus, to become sharp, to feel,” says Walidie, an expert navigator and tracker. “A person who can achieve this mindful focus will know where they are, even if they are a Middle Eastern person in Canada. When you don’t know where you are, you don’t know your place in the world.”¹¹

Finally, there is daylight attention, the kind of attention that lets you stop and think about how you even know what your values are – those moments in which you see everything clearly. Without this, Hari says, “[i]t’s like you become lost in your own life.” It is only in the light of day, with time and space to reflect, that we can really see who we are and be intentional about where we are putting our hearts. “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives,”¹² Annie Dillard writes. But how often do we take that step back and see clearly?

Spotlight attention is what we tend to worry about: Where did I put my keys? Why can’t I put down my phone? But starlight and daylight attention – these are what matter the most.

Starlight and sunlight: night and day. Significantly, Judaism is both a lunar and solar religion. Rosh Hashanah varies each year based on the new moon, but it also follows the sun, so it can fall anytime between September 5 and October 5, but never in August or November – unlike Christmas, for example, on the solar calendar, which always falls on December 25, or Ramadan, on the lunar calendar, which can take place all year round.

“A calendar,” Judith Shulevitz writes, “is more than the organization of days and months. It’s the blueprint for a shared life.”¹³ And for Jews, a radically democratic people, it is a participatory project. No, you can’t choose when you want Rosh Hashanah to fall when you pay your dues. Sorry. But determining the calendar used to depend on ordinary people like you or me witnessing the appearance of the new moon, and bringing the news to Jerusalem. This was so important that it even warranted breaking the rules of the Sabbath, and everyone who came to give testimony – even if the news had already been delivered – would be welcomed with a great feast.¹⁴ Apparently incentivizing religious practice with food is a very old tradition. The bonus is feeding our bellies. But ever since God told Abraham to count the stars to see how numerous his descendants would be, the point is to look up at the sky.

And daytime? Daytime is defined by the Talmud as when it is bright enough to recognize someone else’s face.¹⁵ Isn’t this amazing? Not Facebook faces – real faces. Recognizing that we inhabit a world shared with other people in all three dimensions, and that we can only understand

¹¹ Gitit Ginat, “How a Bedouin Tracker Sees the Desert,” *Atlas Obscura*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/bedouin-desert-tracking-negev>.

¹² Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life* (New York, 1989).

¹³ Judith Shulevitz, “Why You Never See Your Friends Anymore,” *The Atlantic*, November 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/11/why-dont-i-see-you-anymore/598336/>.

¹⁴ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:5, 1:9, and 2:5. These insights are based on a lecture by Dr. Micah Goodman, “Creating or Surrendering to the Creator,” 5777 Rabbinic Holiday Webinar Series of the Shalom Hartman Institute, September 8, 2016, <https://www.hartman.org.il/creating-or-surrendering-to-the-creator-rosh-hashana-video/>. Goodman says: “The Mishnah offers a lot of motivation for people all over Israel to be moon observers, to search for the moon that night where the moon disappeared and to wait for the moment that it’s born, and then to run to Jerusalem, to the *beit din*, to offer their testimony that they’ve seen the birth of the moon.”

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 9b.

ourselves in relation to each other. “Attention is love,” the poet Marge Piercy writes, “what we must give/children, mothers, fathers, pets,/our friends, the news, the woes of others.”¹⁶ We do not, we cannot, exist in isolation – if we have learned anything, we have learned this. All this, Judaism teaches, demands our attention. All of this asks for our heart.

שִׁמּוֹ לְבַבְכֶם עַל-דַּרְכֵיכֶם, the prophet Haggai proclaims, *set your heart on your path*. Haggai, our obscure, insightful prophet, is speaking in Jerusalem, the 6th century BCE, a month before Rosh Hashanah.¹⁷ The Jews were coming back to the land, after the Babylonian exile and the destruction of the First Temple. But, to the prophet’s dismay, they are paying attention to all the wrong things.¹⁸ “It’s not time yet to rebuild the Temple,” they say. And yet, they are all busy, running to, and renovating their own homes.

I have a lot of empathy for the people. They’ve lived through trauma and loss. They are brave enough to come back, and all they want to do is shelter in place. Why is Haggai giving them a hard time? Because the ancient Temple, like the calendar, was the blueprint for a shared life. So he knew, in that moment, that it was all the more important for them to look beyond their own fears to build and rebuild together, to look up at the sky and celebrate their festivals, to look at each other’s faces without distraction, to remember what matters most.

I should have known, even without the AirTag: the keys were in the Temple after all.

¹⁶ Marge Piercy, “The Art of Blessing the Day,” *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme* (New York, 1999).

¹⁷ See Tzvi Senensky, “Haggai: Prophet of Elul,” *Lehrhaus*, August 9, 2018, <https://thelehrhaus.com/timely-thoughts/haggai-prophet-of-elul/>, for a discussion of the significance of Haggai’s message, and its timing and relationship to Rosh Hashanah.

¹⁸ See also the citation of Haggai in *Mesillat Yescharim* 2:11, the 18th century Mussar classic by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, in his discussion of how busyness can divert our attention from what is most important.