

Introduction



ATTENTION FRAGMENTATION AND THE TESHUVA OF ROSH HASHANAH

Before last Rosh Hashanah, I had the privilege of hosting social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in my new Great Conversations Series to discuss his bestselling book, *The Anxious Generation*. In our discussion, he shared how social media and phone usage by adolescents in the past fifteen years created alarming mental health challenges for the next generation. Depression spiked, anxiety rose and social isolation spread faster than ever. While so much of the public focus of Dr. Haidt's work has been focused on the mental health crisis to our youth, Dr. Haidt at the time said that there's an even scarier symptom of this technology wave.

He calls it "Attention Fragmentation" – and it affects everyone, not just children. After years of doomscrolling on social media, swiping between computer tabs, and glancing at phone notifications while we converse, we have decreased our

capacity to devote profound attention to work, family, and our inner lives. As we fill the gaps in our days with short-form videos, we lack the concentration to ponder crucial questions like how we focus our energies, what is our purpose, and to whom we owe our love.

While the modern lifecycle does not leave designated space to solve our Attention Fragmentation and start paying attention to the things that matter most, Judaism calls on us to engage in teshuva and refocus our commitments every autumn.

The most famous writings on teshuva are found in Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuva*. Here he presents two different models for how we reclaim our priorities.

The first two chapters of *Hilchot Teshuva* describe the retrospective Teshuva of Yom Kippur. In his introduction, Rambam writes that teshuva obligates a sinner to "repent from his sin before God



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and confess," defining the commandment as "abandoning one's sins, removing them from his thoughts and resolving in his heart never to commit them again" (2:2). Similarly, Rambam describes *teshuva gemurah*, or complete teshuva, as connected to absolving past sins. A person reaches "complete teshuva" when confronting the same situation of previous sin and abstaining from it. The Teshuva of Yom Kippur thus informs us how to distance ourselves from our misdeeds.

However, we are left wondering how we

should devote our time. Now that we've wiped our slate clean, how should we live a life full of purpose and meaning?

Rambam answers this question in the third chapter of *Hilchos Teshuva*. Here, he presents a forward-looking model of repentance: Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah. In this chapter, the emphasis is not on distancing oneself from a past sin but on creating a better future.

In this chapter, Rambam describes teshuva as performing more mitzvot, giving more charity and increasing one's good deeds.

In this context, Rambam writes that the practice for the Ten Days of Repentance is "to rise at night during these ten days and to pray in the synagogues words of supplication until the morning hours."

Rambam is not the first to mention this custom. The tradition of reciting Selichot during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur dates back to the period of the geonim. But when mentioned in this chapter, the custom takes on a new layer of meaning. The key image that Rambam employs to describe the Teshuva of Rosh Hashana is waking up, where the shofar essentially reminds us:

עורו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו
מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה
וזכרו בוראכם.
*Wake up you sleepy ones from your sleep and
you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds,
repent, remember your Creator.*

The blast of the shofar serves as a wake up call to all those who are living mindlessly and spending their days on futile

endeavors. This is the brilliant *chidush* of Rambam. Normally, when we think about teshuva, we focus on sin. But according to Rambam, the adversary to which the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah responds is not sin but sleep.

This spiritual awakening on Rosh Hashanah is not a confession of one's sins or a path to fixing the past. It is about doing more with one's time and making more meaningful life choices. This is the source of the custom to not sleep on Rosh Hashanah and why reciting Selichot is a metaphorical act of teshuva, as it requires one to awaken and to "rise at night."

There are grave consequences for us if we do not heed this call to the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah.

I remember, some years ago, during my tenure as a congregational rabbi, a distinguished, older gentleman met with me a few days before Rosh Hashanah. He was well-respected, comfortably married for forty-five years, blessed with loving children and grandchildren, and physically fit. When I asked whether he had any unrealized dreams, he recounted a bucket-list he still hoped to accomplish — none of it related to his professional life. But when I asked if he was devoting time to these goals, he said no; he was simply too busy at work to start any new projects. He laughed off my suggestion that he rethink his schedule, even though he was financially secure and physically capable of pursuing his deferred dreams.

Years later, after I had left my congregational position and moved to Israel, I was on a return trip to New York when I bumped into the same man on

the street. I was struck by the change in his appearance: his once healthy frame was now thin and weak, his face pale and gaunt, the result of a sudden, life-threatening medical emergency and long recuperation. I asked him how he was spending his time. He responded the same way he always had: he was extremely busy in the office.

Was this man violating any specific transgression? No. His was not a story of sin, but of missed opportunity — of attention poured entirely into the urgent at the expense of the meaningful, until an entire life's worth of "someday" would, almost imperceptibly, run out.

In an age of fragmented attention, when technology is designed to pull us away from thinking and living deeply, we risk devoting more and more of our time to trivial pursuits and less to the endeavors and people who matter most.

The Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah — the wake-up call of the shofar — is meant for all of us who can live more conscientiously and purposefully in a world of distraction.

To our benefit, the tefilot and introspection of the High Holidays grant us the chance to refocus our time commitments. Yes, the Teshuva of Yom Kippur and the accompanying *vidui* allow us to look back at our past misdeeds. But the Teshuva of Rosh Hashanah and the wake-up call of the shofar empower us to contemplate a better tomorrow. During these days, let us pause and consider how we spend the hours of our days and devote our time to a life full of sanctity and meaning.

May we all heed the call of the shofar, break free from our distractions, and awaken to a year of deep connections, mindful devotion, and profound purpose.



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