

Our family took an overnight trip to Mount Rainier National Park this summer. The landscape, everywhere we went, was breathtaking, teeming with stunning wild life. There were places to stop along the hike at Paradise where you could see not only Mount Baker, but also St Helens and Adams all at once, while Rainier was right there beside you. Accompanied by mountain goats, from the Sunrise Lodge we hiked the Burroughs Mountain Trail, passed Frozen Lake until we reached the Second Burroughs that drop you just beneath the towering Mount Rainier. Standing in that place, taking a deep breath, I became present to the immensity of the world in which we are blessed to live. Yet in the next instant, I began to feel wave after wave of deeply mournful anger. The contrast between the vastness of what I was experiencing in that moment, and the rapidly shrinking narrowness of the world of hypnotizing thoughts, concepts and false identities that made up and entrapped my life was painfully sharp. I felt robbed of the awareness of my human multi-dimensionality, of my belonging to this whole beautiful planet, of my belonging to the whole human race, and to the Beloved. What were the forces at play in our lives, I began to wonder, that cause us to shrink this inherently vast and expansive awareness of ours, down to the claustrophobic confines of our ego's myopic concerns? What is the mind-shriveling vortex that causes our world to be reduced from the 360-degree vista at the top of a mountain, to the mere 15-inch screen of our laptop or, smaller yet, the 4 ½ inches of our smart phone?

Our egos crave “the goodies,” the feel-good experiences—indeed, anything that can distract us from what's unpleasant, uncomfortable or reminds us of our unavoidable death. It creates for us, therefore, a mesmerizing soap opera that plays day-in and day-out following the script of our chattering minds. Though we believe that all of us live in a shared world, that is not exactly true. The world, as perceived by our senses, is apprehended by the mind through the unique prism of our individual conditioning. Based on this particular conditioning, the mind creates a distinct narrative about the world and our experience in it. Each of us lives, in fact, in our own interpreted world, thinking our self to be the main character in our self-made unfolding inner drama projected on the silver screen of Awareness. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, as it is a process that is built-in as part of the human matrix. The problem arises when we become wholly and exclusively identified with that illusory character, collapsed into a world of thoughts, made-up stories and manufactured worldviews, and forget that we are the Awareness *within which* this character and its drama are arising. When we do, we lose the mountain for the laptop, the grand vista of awareness for the blinders of ego. We find ourselves hypnotized by the thought drama, our world bound-up in its stories, lost in the ego-tunnel as Professor Thomas Metzinger coined it.

The thousands of years that we call human history are, by and large, the manifestation of this ego-drama. As far as we can tell this has, to date (and with noted exceptions,) mostly been a horror movie. Yet if history has taught us anything, it is that we have to be extremely mindful of who and what is feeding our inner drama, what external forces are attempting to shape our story, our thoughts. With each stage of human evolution, we have seen great expanding light and progress, often crushed later on by its accompanying dark shadow. What part of the historical cycle do you think we are experiencing now?

Just a generation or so ago, it seemed that humanity's consciousness was broadening, that we were rising up toward our next evolutionary peak, and in gaining altitude we could see more, embrace more, include more. Leaders were talking about the dawn of the global age. The world was being transformed into what some already had dubbed a "global village." After a thousand years of wars, Europe was coming together as a Union. The collapse of the Eastern Block saw the walls of separation erased, free exchange, free circulation of people and goods. It was predicted that the next generation would finally know a world without borders. Wasn't the internet going to connect us all anyway? A new, global consciousness was within reach. Our children, we were told, would be living in a radically different world; their newfound identity would transcend the country of their birth, making them citizens of the world, members of the global human family.

Douglas Rushkoff in an essay titled "The New Nationalism," argues that the dawn of the Internet Era was not, as predicted, a continuation and expansion of the Television Era. Whereas the Television Era brought us *into* the world of globalism, the Internet era created a radically different human landscape. In a *digital* world everything is looked at through a binary prism: 1 or 0, on or off. "It's no wonder," Rushkoff writes, "that a society functioning on these platforms would tend toward similarly discrete formulations. Like or unlike? Black or white? Rich or poor? Agree or disagree? In a self-reinforcing feedback loop, each choice we make is noticed and acted upon by the algorithms personalizing our news feeds, further isolating each [...] of us, [locking us into] our own ideological [...] bubble. The transition to a digital media environment is making people a [...] lot less tolerant of [the] dissolution of boundaries." Hypnotized by the unfolding theatrics on our phones and computer screens, obsessed with every tweet, we are made to be further and further disconnected from the actual world and to live more and more in the virtual world of daily media distractions. The algorithms that are feeding us this ongoing drama are causing us to lose the ability to take multiple perspectives, the capacity to consider worldviews dissimilar to our own. This ability is the hallmark of growth, of expanding human consciousness. Instead, our awareness is being drastically constricted by manipulative external forces. A recent interview in an online magazine featured Maryanne Wolf's new book: "Reader, Come Home" about, as its subtitle states, "the reading brain in a digital world." In it, she makes the case that technology is changing the brain in a way that is causing us to lose deep attention and deep

learning. “A digital medium,” she explains, “requires us to process large amounts of information very quickly, it [...] diminishes [our capacity to take] the time [needed] for slower processing work. And these slower processes are deep learning, the ones that are more cognitively challenging... that build our very important critical, analytical, and empathetic processes.... When you lose the novel,” she concludes, “you lose the ability to go into another person’s perspective.” Instead of ushering us toward the next evolution of human consciousness, toward global consciousness, the digital era is causing us to regress. We are being mind-hacked into tribalization. We are being mind-hacked into deepening narcissism. Shackled in our dark ego-tunnel, we are robbed of the vista awaiting us at the top of the mountain of Awareness, the mount of Divine Transmission—which, incidentally, is one of the translations of the Hebrew word *Moriah*.

“*And it was after all these things, God put [humanity] to a test... And God said, ‘...Lech Lecha – go to your True Self, to the land of Moriah... [to] one of the mountains that I will point to you.’*” [Gen. 22:1-2] Consider, for a moment, that this may not have been addressed to Abraham some thousands of years ago; but rather that this might be addressed to us today. Perhaps, just like us, Abraham had let himself be caught in the consciousness-narrowing ego-drama of his life: the three strangers visiting him, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, King Avimelech’s nearly taking Sarah as a wife and the subsequent covenant Abraham cut with the local king. And, of course, the birth of Isaac, and Sarah’s plotting leading to the banishment of Ishmael. What if this had nothing to do with offering up Isaac, and everything to do with Abraham being able to snap out of his ego-trance and hear God’s call again? Which might explain the *Lech Lecha* echo of God’s initial communication to Abraham in Charran. Imagine, if you could, that God—whatever you understand that to be—is calling each of us from beyond our own ego-tunnel, inviting us to break free from our drama-addiction and meet our True Self in the expanded awareness symbolized by the mountain of Moriah.

“*And it was after all these things, God put [humanity] to a test.*” Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch understood the word “test,” from the Hebrew “*Nisah*,” to mean: “to raise on high... to advance something to a further or higher point...” [The Hirsch Chumash, *Bereshit*, p.482] How would we answer, on this Rosh HaShanah, if God was putting **us** to the test, wanting us to *rise* to our fullest human potential? It takes an act of spiritual resistance to not collapse into the mesmerizing soap opera of the human ego-drama, to remain clear-minded amidst the whirlwind of external forces trying to reduce us to alienating polarized group-think. The climb up the mountain may be steep, remaining *on* the mountain might require constant vigilance, and constant practice. Yet I have grown convinced after reading Rushkoff, Wolf and so many others who are sounding the alarm, that we really don’t have a choice.

So what are we to do? A recent statistic showed that though Smart-Phone purchases rose 2% in 2017, so-called Dumb-Phone purchases rose 8%. Some of us are already making the switch away from technological omnipresence. Of course, reading books that strengthen our brain's slow processes would be Wolf's recommendation. From a spiritual point of view, our sages tell us that whatever our practice, it must include both *Kavannah* and *T'sumat Lev*; Intention and Attention. For our teachers, everything starts with *Kavannah*, with clear and pure intention; with fierce determination. If we are to engage in this process, heeding God's call, we cannot do it half-heartedly, we cannot be hazy or less than fully committed. Our life requires we live it with absolute integrity, with 100% pure, honest, clear intention. Leaving the ego-tunnel to climb the awareness-mountain is a transformative process that will require nothing short of that.

Yet our strong *Kavannah* must, first and foremost, be in service of our *T'sumat HaLev*, our paying attention, our mindfulness. I particularly love the Hebrew expression for "paying attention." It literally means "to place the heart upon." Whatever we are attentive to, we place our heart upon it. To paraphrase a present-day enlightened master, Adyashanti: "What we really care about isn't necessarily what we 'say' we care about, but rather where we put our most valuable resource—really the only thing we have to give: our time and attention." Our life is the sum of what we give time and attention to. Look at your life and see: what occupies your time? What do we give over our attention to? Make no mistake—exactly that—our time and attention has become the most sought-after monetized commodity in this information age. What would it look like if we took it back; if we reoriented our time and attention toward what truly matters to us? Now more than ever, in an age of perpetual distraction, resisting means reclaiming our ability to focus.

Shimon HaTzadik, a sage who lived circa 200 BCE, established the three core principles of Jewish spiritual practice: *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Chasadim*. *Gemilut Chasadim* means "acts of loving-kindness;" actions that are meant to help us orient our heart toward greater humility, service and compassion. Such practice focuses the mind away from the tyranny of the ego, shifting our priorities from being self-centered to other-centered. *Torah* means study, and it was understood by our sages to be a lifelong endeavor of immersing ourselves daily with spiritual teachings. I translate it to mean: keeping conscious company. It entails choosing with discernment what we allow ourselves to be exposed to, what we allow ourselves to be influenced by. Imagine listening to podcasts or reading books by enlightened masters, deep thinkers and philosophers, Jewish or not. Imagine creating an environment that only allows-in uplifting, mind and heart-expanding content, always being mindful of what feeds our mind, what shapes our inner story. *Avodah* means spiritual practice. Our sages included praying, mitzvot (mindful living) and the millennia-old Jewish practice of meditation as part of *Avodah*. Meditation, beyond its ability to help us connect with the deeper truth within ourselves, is also a means to practicing remaining aware and equanimous in all circumstances, free from the stories of the mind. Also

included in our rabbis' array of *Avodah* practices was the most important one: keeping Shabbat. Keeping a Shabbat practice might help us not only ground ourselves in actualizing the values we most cherish, but provide us with a springboard to transcend the ego-bound melodrama and reclaim the grand vista of our boundless awareness. On a day unplugged from all electronics, we might find ourselves working in the yard, hiking on a trail, playing a board game with our children, curling up on the couch with a good book and a cup of tea, or talking on the phone with far away loved ones. We might find ourselves sitting on our favorite cushion, in a quiet corner of the house, and gently let go into the silence around us, watching the breath coming in and going out, aware of the world but no longer in it, finally at peace with it all. There, in that moment, we will have traveled back to the top of the mountain, to the top of Mount Moriah, only to realize that we had never left.

L'Shanah Tovah.