

Rabbi Shmuel is teaching a lunch and learn class at his *shul* when all of a sudden, an angel appears. The angel says to the rabbi, "Rabbi Shmuel, you are an example to all of your fellow human beings. You are the best rabbi since Moses because you know how to pay attention.

God has noticed that you really pay attention to your congregants and that you never forget their names. God has noticed that when they tell you their life stories, you are never distracted. You even know their grandkids' names.

God is aware that your ability to pay attention has made you a very learned man who knows the Talmud backwards and forwards.

So, Rabbi Shmuel, in return for being such a great rabbi, I am going to offer you a choice of reward. You can either have fifty million dollars or divine wisdom. If you take the money, you and your family will want for nothing.

If you take the wisdom, there will be no question beyond your grasp, and you will have a photographic memory for any Jewish holy book you read. What is your choice, Rabbi Shmuel? Whatever you choose will be immediately granted."

Without any hesitation whatsoever, Rabbi Shmuel replies, "Money is not the important thing in life, Torah is. I choose to have divine wisdom."

"*Mazeltov* to you, Rabbi Shmuel," says the Angel. "It's done. Enjoy!"

The angel then disappears as quickly as it had appeared. For a few minutes there was a stunned silence in the study group. No one could believe what had just happened in front of their eyes. Then one of the study group members broke the silence.

"Rabbi Shmuel," he asks, "why don't you test out your new found wisdom right away? Say something really wise to us, rabbi."

Rabbi Shmuel replies, "Oy vay, I should have taken the money."

The angel rewarded the rabbi because of his ability to pay attention. My message to you today is that paying attention is the unseen foundation of a life well-lived. If we really want a shanah tovah, if we really desire a good new year, the best thing we can do is pay attention.

First, I'm going to tell you why it has become difficult to pay attention. Then I'll explain what needs and deserves our attention. Finally, I'll show you why paying attention and Rosh Hashanah are tied together as concepts.

Let's start with why it has become difficult to pay attention. I think that paying attention has become more difficult because our world is changing at a pace far more rapid than our bodies can match.

You may have heard that attention spans are falling. You may have seen a recent New York Times article that claimed our average attention span was a mere eight seconds, literally less than that of a goldfish.

I am happy to report that this is an urban myth. The study reported in the Times has been criticized for sloppy methodology, and the article itself was an opinion piece that was not adequately fact-checked.

Our attention spans have not decreased at all. In fact, the advent of binge watching television shows suggests that our attention spans may actually be increasing.

It is not uncommon for people these days to watch an entire season of a TV show in a few days, which requires paying attention for hours on end. Not that I've ever done that, oh no, of course not.

No, the problem is not how long we are able to pay attention but what we are paying attention to in the first place. It's not the span that's the issue but rather the target.

We're not paying attention to the right things at the right time, and that can have devastating consequences. First, we have the issue of distracted driving. When I was a teenager in the 1980s, the national crisis was drunk driving. Now, distracted driving is proving to be an even more deadly challenge.

When drivers pay attention to their text messages instead of the road, people die. It turns out that a driver who texts and drives is twice as likely to kill someone as someone who is drunk. Even a second of inattention is more than enough to cause an accident.

And these incidents are becoming extremely common. Every year, over 400,000 people are injured in accidents caused by texting and driving. More than three thousand people each year die in these kinds of accidents, tragedies that often leave a terrifying record - the last, unanswered text message.

Moreover, texting and driving is something that normal people do. I imagine that some of you have done it before. I used to, but never again. Drunk driving is usually caused by people who are alcoholics, people with a medical condition. Texting and driving is more widespread because it doesn't seem dangerous.

It turns out that distracted driving is just part of our attention deficit. More and more, we are paying far more attention to the fictional universe of our collective imagination than we are to reality.

Mind you, there is nothing inherently wrong with the fictional universe of our imagination. It's part of what makes us human. But as they say in Hebrew, Yesh g'vul, there is a limit. There are so many fictional things to pay attention to that our brains are having trouble keeping up.

There is such a vast universe of entertainment and information, online and onscreen, text, video and audio. With the recent development of very small and very fast chipsets, we now have virtual reality and augmented reality. And all of it is squeezing out real reality.

I understand why people like the fictional universe more than reality. For a whole lot of people, reality is not such a nice place. In the fictional universe, good triumphs and the wicked perish. In the land of make-believe, the world's problems can be solved in 44 minutes. The fictional universe is never boring.

Alas, our overloaded brains are having trouble paying attention to all that fiction while also maintaining our grip on the real world. All of that make-believe has created a serious clog, and the fiction is bleeding into the real world.

That's not a good thing. When fiction invades reality, it's the spiritual version of a backed up plumbing system. It's a mess, it stinks, and resolving it is neither pretty nor pleasant.

Ask any prosecutor or criminal defense attorney about the effect that television shows like CSI have had on the legal profession. Juries today want cases to be simple and they want easy-to-interpret DNA evidence, just as happens on TV. That is not always in the interest of justice in the real world.

Demanding DNA evidence for a conviction can result in letting the guilty go free. Sometimes, there isn't DNA evidence, just a big pile of clues that lead to one logical conclusion.

Likewise, demanding DNA can result in innocent people being convicted. Every time we touch something, we leave our DNA on it in the form of skin cells. Just because you touched the knife doesn't mean you stabbed someone with it. If you don't believe me, go ask Amanda Knox, the woman who was wrongly convicted of killing her roommate while studying abroad in Italy.

Moreover, the spillover from the fictional world into reality encourages people to believe things that are completely impossible. Now if someone wants to believe in Bigfoot, I don't really care. But if someone wants to believe in a conspiracy theory in which Jews are taking over the world, that concerns me greatly.

The fictional bleed from delusional websites no doubt encouraged the ignorant masses in Charlottesville to yell "Jews will not replace us." It causes them to think that we are conspiring to rule the world.

And our addiction to shows like The Voice makes ordinary people think they can strive for stardom when they should be aiming for education and gainful employment.

Now I'm not suggesting that we disconnect from technology and mass media. But I am suggesting that we find a way to rebalance our culture so that we are more attentive to reality than we currently are.

It's not easy to reduce the consumption of anything. Sometimes I'll temporarily disable my house's internet connection when it's time for the kids to do their homework.

That never goes over very well. You'd think that I turned off oxygen and life support, and I'm sure it's that way in other households as well. All the same, I do believe that paying attention to reality is important enough that a cultural refocusing is warranted.

So now that I've established that we're not paying enough attention, what *should* we be paying more attention to once we're able to look up from our trance? The first thing that we should be paying attention to is ourselves, our own souls.

When was the last time you took a good long look at yourself in the mirror in the spiritual sense? When was the last time you really did an inventory of your soul? We tend to avoid doing that, because that's when we find out what's missing and broken, and ignorance is bliss.

Ultimately, that is what repentance is. It's an exercise in spiritual forensics. What did we do right? What did we do wrong? How can we replicate our good deeds, and how can we repair the damage we've done?

It also wouldn't be a bad idea for us to pay more attention to ourselves in the physical sense. Some people, especially seniors, spend a lot of time in the doctor's office, but others actively avoid medical attention at all costs. Pay attention to what your body is telling you, and let your doctor be the translator.

The Sage Hillel taught that while we must pay attention to ourselves, we cannot focus on ourselves exclusively. So what else should we pay attention to? Well, let's start by paying attention to each other, especially those in our families whom we tend to take for granted so easily.

Paying attention to your spouse is an easy thing to get lazy about, especially if you've been together for more than a decade, and all the more so if you're working on five or six decades. And it's not that you never buy her flowers. The bigger issue is are you present, or is your spouse alone even when you're in the house?

Paying attention to those we care about is the foundation of empathy, and if you've listened to any of my sermons over the past twelve years, you know that the issue of empathy is a regular with me.

The Torah tells us over and over again to pay attention to the welfare of the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor. But if we can't even do a good job of paying attention to the people who live under our own roofs, how can we ever aspire to have empathy for the disadvantaged we've never met?

Paying attention to people is vital, but that's not all we have to pay attention to. We have to pay attention to history, something that has completely fallen by the wayside. We have relegated the study of history to the ivory tower, but it deserves to be front and center.

History is not merely the passage of time. History has predictable moods, history has swells and tides like the ocean, it waxes and wanes like the moon. That's why Mark Twain said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

It's not enough to simply know what happened. We have to understand history's rhyme scheme, it's patterns; we have to comprehend what it is telling us about our present and our probable future. And we can only do that by paying close attention.

As is the case with our souls and our bodies, it is at times more pleasant to ignore history, to make up crazy ideas that poorly camouflage what we already know to be true.

It's easier to say that the world doesn't have a radical Islam problem, it's easier to say that the terrorists are nothing like the Nazis, it's easier to say that all cultures are equally good.

But when we do that, when we ignore what history has already told us more times than I care to count, we leave ourselves vulnerable.

So why talk about paying attention on Rosh Hashanah? The most obvious connection is the tekiah blast of the Shofar. Yesterday, I told you that the teruah is about fear. The tekiah is a call to pay attention.

When our Biblical ancestors heard the shofar, they knew they had to pay attention to something, usually the announcement of a new moon or a festival. For us, the tekiah tells us to pay attention, to focus on all the things that are part of reality and all the things that truly matter.

The more subtle connection with Rosh Hashanah is the story of the Binding of Isaac, the Akedah. How is it that Abraham was able to even *consider* sacrificing Isaac on the altar, let alone almost do it?

I think God's test of Abraham was a test of whether or not he was paying attention to the right things at the right time. Would he pay attention to the mission that God gave him from the very beginning, the mission to be a blessing to the world, or would he be distracted by the order to kill his own son.

As we all read every year at this time, Abraham messed up and failed to pay attention. As a result, an angel had to wake him up from his trance and tell him to stop what he was doing. Before the angel ordered him to stop, he was like a baby transfixed by a shiny object.

The story of the Akedah bears some similiarity to the children's game Simon Says, a game that is a simple test of whether the players can pay attention. God says go to a land I will show you, God says be a blessing, God says your offspring will have this land, KILL YOUR SON!

The commandment to kill Isaac was so different from the other things God had said to him that Abraham should have noticed that something was awry. Had he been paying attention, I think he would have.

So there you have it. Our flooded brains aren't paying attention to the right things. We need to focus on ourselves, our loved ones, and on history itself. This is what Rosh Hashanah demands of us.

Now I get to ask you the question I've been dying to ask. I just gave you a sermon about paying attention. Were you paying attention? Shanah tovah.