

ROSH HASHANA 5774 – Second Day

Benjamin Franklin once wrote “dost thou love life? Then do not squander time; for that’s the stuff life is made of . . . Lost time is never found again and what we call time enough always proves little enough. . . Employ they time well, if thou meanest to gain leisure. Since thou are not sure of a minute, throw not away an hour.”

Many years ago, when I asked my mom why I had never gone to nursery school, she answered, “you loved watching “I Love Lucy” so much on TV, that I didn’t have to send you to school.”

Like most of us, I love TV and have loved it for as long as I can remember. It can be relaxing after a tough day or when we just want some entertainment. However, TV becomes an issue when some people watch so much TV that this diversion becomes their focus or even their obsession.

Decades ago I learned the therapeutic value of funerals. While sad and sometimes tragic for the family and friends, I found them to be very helpful in reorienting me to what was truly important in life, as opposed to what I was stressing over on any given day.

Funerals remind us, in a very direct way, that our time on Earth is limited and we should begin to figure out how we want to impact the world in whatever time we have left. What is our purpose? What do we want to do with our lives and how are we going about getting it done?

These are some of the questions we confront every year on the High Holy Days, as we take off from work and confront deeply existential questions. We Jews have always understood that there is more to life than work. Two thousand years ago, Roman culture mocked our people as lazy and slothful for taking an entire day off from work in order to observe Shabbat.

Of course, we know that Shabbat is a brilliant way to recharge our physical, psychological and spiritual batteries. Observing Shabbat actually makes us more efficient for the rest of the week.

However, what are we doing with the rest of that week? While today we focus on improving ourselves, our families and our society, we are regularly being offered new temptations to divert us from these goals. As Americans, we have a fascination with poor role models and bad behavior. In the first sliver of the 21st century, we have already fawned far too much over Britney, then Paris, Lindsay and even Kim. Now it may be A-Rod and Miley.

Whether it is athletes addicted to PEDs, celebrities addicted to alcohol or drugs, it is easy to pile on, like the New York media does to local athletes and politicians. However, the truth is that we are a nation with an addiction problem. Like most every addict, we don't want to hear about our problem. We can handle it, no matter who tells us that we can't.

Take one of my favorite pet peeves, smart phones. Admittedly, I am not a user, but it isn't because I'm not impressed with all that the "so-called" smart phones can do. They are amazing. They offer incredible services. The reason I avoid them is the same reason I don't have bowls full of peanut butter cups on my desk. I avoid them because of the temptation to overindulge.

How many of us here are always by our phone? How many of us never let our phone get more than ten feet away from us, whether we are in bed, in the shower, at our desk or in the bathroom? How many of us begin to get nervous and tense when our phone is not at our side.

Less than two years ago, the writers of the TV show "The Office" wrote this phenomenon into a script when Ryan, at a trivia contest, was asked to shut off his smart phone. He said he wouldn't look at it, but of course, he did. When the host of the contest said he had to take it away, Ryan left the building, saying "I can't not touch it; I can't not have my phone. . . I want to be with my phone."

The truth is that many of us manifest the same behaviors with our phones as other addicts do with their drugs. For increasing numbers of us, the phone is no longer an accessory, but rather a drug; we need it or we can't be at peace.

How else to explain people crossing busy streets while looking at their phone? How else to explain that despite thousands of people dying and getting seriously injured due to distracted driving every year, people still can't stay off of their phones? Perhaps Google glass will ultimately provide a way for people to be online without being so obvious, but those glasses are just feeding the addiction.

Like any drug pusher, Google, Samsung, Apple and the others will keep providing new drugs when the old stuff just isn't strong enough any more. They make boatloads of money doing so and once we're hooked, it's awfully hard to pull away. Of course, none of us believe we are addicts. "We can control our usage any time that we want!"

The Biblical prophet Jeremiah is one of the saddest figures in the entire Jewish Bible. Commanded by God to chastise the people and to make them aware of the error of their ways, Jeremiah is also told that he will be hated, persecuted and threatened for his message. He has no prospect of getting through to the people, but God tells him that his preaching is a necessary part of the Divine plan.

I understand that this message is one which will be rejected by so many here today. It will be seen as the rantings of a dinosaur who refuses to adjust to the times. However, there is no doubt that electronic devices,

especially those smart phones, are incredibly addictive. Some studies show that fully half of Orthodox Jewish teenagers text on Shabbat. They rationalize this clear violation of Shabbat as acceptable behavior because the alternative is to admit that they're addicted.

Like many sports fans, I am perfectly capable of channel surfing and coming across a game whose teams have no special connection to me. However, after a couple of minutes of watching, it's hard for me to leave the room. When and if I am pulled away, the spell has been broken and, chances are, I won't really even worry about who won the game. However, while I'm watching, I'm virtually a prisoner.

That is the way more and more of us are becoming with our phones. They have become more than mere communication devices; they are our companions, as much, if not more so than family and friends.

Increasingly, our phones no longer serve our needs; they are our need and there is nothing smart about becoming addicted to our phones.

We are rapidly becoming a society which doesn't know how to communicate in person, only over a device. And while these devices provide useful and even important information, at times, we all know that for most of us, their primary attraction is that they are our high-tech toys

and gadgets. “Look what this can do! Have you seen this app? My phone can download faster than the last phone.” Frankly, the argument as to how much we need it, as opposed to want it, sounds a lot like the protest of men of generations past who claimed to read “Playboy” for the articles.

This isn't about smart phones not being smart. Like alcohol and even certain drugs, they have their place in our lives. However, our relationship with alcohol, certain drugs and even smart phones is only positive when we control their role in our lives.

When they call the shots, when they begin to control our lives, to dominate our lives, when we cannot live without them, we are no longer social drinkers, we are alcoholics. When we cannot go for more than a short time without a hit from our drug, we are addicts.

Many of us no longer control our lives, for our addiction is controlling us. Our drug prevents us from living life to its fullest. Yes, our phones can do so much more than the last generation of phones. However, we are doing so much less and certainly so much less that has any relevance.

The High Holy Days are a time to review who we are, what we have done and how we can make our lives better. The hardest part is to admit what is so obvious to those who are observing us.

Looking at the students I meet in our Religious School, at the college where I teach, as well as kids and adults whom I encounter all of the time, the trend is disturbingly ominous. Our lives should help to make a positive difference in the world. However, many of us are too busy escaping reality with our phones to have a clue, let alone make a difference.

Many times, when people have weight problems, they are told to keep a record of everything they eat during the day. Often, they never realize how much all of those little snacks add up.

Yes, I'm sure that there is an app for that, but should we count all of those minutes during the week that we are on our phones for something besides conversation, we might be stunned at how many hours we have spent on our "diversion."

As our entertainment gadgets become more powerful and more portable, they are increasingly taking over our lives. The High Holy Days affirm the importance of us taking control of our own lives.

No, I am not asking anyone here to smash their smart phone. Today's call of the shofar reminds us to break out of our routine and to recognize that much of what our phones can do, we can do perfectly well without a phone. We really don't need an app to tell us what to eat for breakfast. It is *our* role to master technology to better the world, not to be slaves to that technology.

This year, may we have the strength and the courage to honestly look at our lives and free ourselves from the addictions which keep us from fulfilling our potential in life. In honestly looking at our actions, we will regain the power to help heal our world and those who dwell in it. We can reclaim our role as God's co-partners, rather than technology's slaves.

AMEN