

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon 5784

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“People of the Book”

As a child, I loved visiting the Bridgewater public library, in my hometown in central Jersey. Once inside, I’d move quickly to the children’s section to rejoin my favorite crime-fighting duo, the Hardy Boys: Frank and Joe, their best friend Chet Morton, racing around Bayport New York in their yellow convertible. I would leave the library with my arms filled - stacking the books by my bed and reading long after I should have been asleep.

I have loved reading since I was young.

And, as many of you know, I *still* love reading. Last year, I was obsessed with the book 4000 Weeks by Oliver Burkeman.

This year, my new favorite book is Maryanne Wolf’s, Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World.

Maryanne Wolf is a researcher and scholar right here at U.C.L.A.’s School of Education and Information Studies. In her most recent book, she studies the rise of digital/online information, the impact on our brains and behaviors, and makes a strong case for a return to **deep reading**.

“Deep reading” is the reading we *used* to do as kids when we lost track of time and dove into another world. Deep reading is reading that can’t easily be disrupted - the kind of reading where your loved one is calling your name repeatedly and you only hear them on the 4th or 5th call.

This kind of reading isn’t just a romantic relationship with the written word - deep reading is *fundamental* to building empathy for others, for insightful and imaginative thinking, and strengthening critical analysis. Deep reading gives us the tools to navigate complexity and uncertainty.

In contrast, the digital realm favors shallow, rapid reading. It allows us to swipe aside what feels too cumbersome or complex. It *diminishes* empathy and understanding.

Now...hang on. I'm not about to tell you to get rid of your phone or your iPad or your kindle. But I have to tell you, and you probably *already* know this is true:

Right now, most of us are indentured servants to our screens, trained to respond at all hours to text message alerts, rewarded with the dopamine hit and, like addicts, searching for more as the feeling quickly fades.

Reading off our screens and consuming information from the internet and social media *corrodes* critical thinking. Digital algorithms guide us to familiar spaces that reinforce our beliefs and limit our perspectives. Maryanne Wolf's research shows it also worsens our current epidemic of loneliness.

Our brains are changing and it's not for the good.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I want to return to you a part of Jewish tradition and identity that we may have forgotten, or lost, along the way: **We are the People of the Book.**

We practically invented the idea of Deep Reading.

And what Jews have known for years, science is now able to prove: Deep reading is a practice that nourishes and strengthens all of us, as individuals...and as a society.

Looking back, I realize I've been talking about this book since last December. I even texted a few friends when I first read it and said "Friends, *this* is our High Holy Day sermon for 2023."

However, because it's Rosh Hashanah and apologies are in order, I need you to know:

I listened to this book on Audible.

That's correct. A book that preaches the importance of deep, focused reading from actual books...and I chose to listen to it on my phone while driving to work or cleaning up the playroom. So I need this sermon as much as any of us.

We are the People. of. the. Book. This is our inheritance and our superpower. It's within our grasp to rediscover and reclaim our title. And there's no better time to do it than now. I'm not asking you to give up technology or social media. I'm arguing, along with Maryanne Wolf, for a biliterate brain - to center deep reading *alongside* digital reading, and allow your brain to be changed, *again*, that we might live this next year with more compassion, connection, and imagination.

Reading is amazing on your own.

Rudine Sims Bishop wrote about books offering us: “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors”¹: Reading helps us to see into someone else's life (window), to have our lives reflected back (mirror), and to cross a threshold and experience another world (sliding door). Reading is not just fundamental; it's metamorphic.

And while reading alone is fun, reading in groups can be amazing, too.

Reading can be magical when we do it together. And we should know! For generations, Jews have been encouraging Deep Reading in pairs: We call it *chevruta* study.

***Chevruta* study** is traditional Jewish text study done in partnership. It is meant to unlock hidden knowledge and insight from within the readers as they bounce ideas off one another and dive deeper into the text.

¹ Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf](https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf)

Our Torah study groups will be the first to testify that it is thanks to a group setting, a shared book club if you will of the oldest book we have, that they are able to unlock new meanings year after year.

Can I tell you how it works?

They read a handful of verses every week and then spend an *hour* thinking deeply about their meaning, considering the impact on their lives and listening to one another share insights which may not always align. **One hour dedicated to a handful of verses!** A commitment to Deep Reading in which the goal is not to finish with speed and efficiency, but rather to spend time reading and reflecting. Not to emerge with certainty, but rather to practice living with curiosity and *contemplation*.

Before the Apple Watch, Jews used to tell time by looking at the cycles of the moon...*really* studying them. When the sliver was finally eclipsed by darkness, it told our ancestors the new month was about to begin. We needed the information to set our calendar, to calibrate when we moved out of ordinary time and into holy, sacred spaces.

For our ancestors, time was set through quiet contemplation, measurement, and collaborative analysis - *TWO witnesses* conferring together over what they saw and understood.

There was no rushing. There was no skimming. There were no notifications telling you it was time to stand up.

Now, we stare at multiple screens simultaneously. We rarely stare at the nighttime sky. We rarely take time to reflect. Yet, here we are, on the cusp of the new month of Tishri, with a mere sliver in the nighttime sky, with time to think and reflect...how fortuitous.

“Reading is an act of contemplation” writes David Ulin, in his book *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time*. “...**an act of resistance in a landscape of distraction.**”

Now, before we pat ourselves on the back as the People of the Book (not to mention the people who have had a book on their laps for almost two hours) I do want to share a chapter in our history when we were *not as confident* about the power of the written word.

Interestingly, there was a moment, thousands of years ago, when reading from a book - *specifically* a book outside the Bible - was considered “dangerous”. As my friend and colleague Sara Wolkenfeld writes²:

“(There is a story in the Talmud about) two renegade rabbis (who) are caught with black market technology: a *written* scroll of *rabbinic* stories. (At that time,) all religious teachings *other than the Bible* itself were to be transmitted *orally*, from teacher to student.”

You see, the transition from an oral culture to a written one was no small thing. In *this* chapter of our lives, tradition *prioritized* face to face encounters. Careful and controlled transmission from teacher to student. But, *writing down* your teacher’s stories - *even if the goal was to read and learn together after class* - was a clear violation of the rules. It *should* have led to an automatic red card.

However...the renegade rabbis were never punished. The Talmudic story tells of a threat through the mass distribution of materials, not knowing *who* would read them or *how* they would be used, yet it portrays the transgression by noting it was a *pair of rabbis* holding a written scroll. **A chevruta**. I.e. Two individuals who had *chosen to read and learn together* might have created, in the rabbinic mind, the *necessary* check and balance to moderate what some feared would lead to dangerous thinking.

² “These rabbis were crossing a technological red line: All religious teachings other than the Bible itself were to be transmitted orally, from teacher to student. According to this section of the Talmud, it was forbidden to write down any religious teaching outside of the text of the Bible. And yet, despite the clear prohibition articulated in this passage, some scholars were so excited about the promise of a new technological frontier for their material they committed their ideas to writing. By applying the technology of writing to rabbinic teaching and learning, their own ideas would be better preserved, and future generations would gain access to unprecedented riches of learning, as each new scholar’s wisdom could be passed on to new communities.” <https://religiondispatches.org/how-an-ancient-story-of-renegade-rabbis-caught-with-black-market-technology-can-help-us-navigate-chatgpts-apocalyptic-aura/>

Right now, we are in a battle against the weaponization of words as the mass distribution of misinformation, hate, and violence spread at the speed of one gigabit per second. Our ancestors were right to be afraid. Without friendships, partnerships, or community to hold us accountable and challenge our ideas, we are more susceptible to radicalization.

Right now, we are caught in the hypocrisy of declaring free speech on the internet, but removing books from our schools and libraries.

Book bans have been reported in at least 32 states³ and overwhelmingly, book banners continue to target stories by and about people of color or LGBTQ+ individuals⁴, for fear that society may crumble if given access to such provocative ideas as equality, diversity, and empathy.

Books can be downright terrifying. I get it. Books challenge our assumptions about the world and the people who live within it. Books invite personal and societal transformation and may even be credited with the occasional revolution or mass Exodus. Books can change us, and, as we know, not everybody likes change.

In a way, we have the renegade rabbis to thank. The Talmud helped to make us biliterate. We were no longer just the People of One Book. We added more stories to our shelves. We *expanded* the way we learned and also who got access to the materials. We encouraged people to read together. And we are all the better for it.

We *need* books in our lives. And whether by forces of fear or culture of convenience, the pages are moving farther from our hands.

I know we're looking for big solutions to overwhelming problems. And we want it done yesterday. We need something to hold onto *now*. Something that will help us return, reflect, and renew.

³ ...with most bans concentrated in just five: Florida, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas and Utah.

⁴ <https://pen.org/report/banned-in-the-usa-state-laws-supercharge-book-suppression-in-schools/>

THIS is something we can do. It's small. It's daily. And it's proven to change your brain, which can change your behavior, which can change your life.

Our lives are *centered* on our screens and the books are off to the side.

This year, I want us to pick up our books and hold them front and center, *and put our tiny screens off to the side.*

This year, I want to see you binge-read a book, staying up far past your bedtime because you just had to read another chapter.

This year, I want you to fall in love with a book and when the check-out person at Trader Joe's asks you "How's your day going?" you feel *compelled* to tell them *all about it.*

This year, I want us to reclaim our title as the People of the Book.

This year, at Temple Isaiah:

Join me in a reading challenge. If you're already on your phone, move over to a note, and write down my top 3 recommendations:

The Sabbath by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel - it's an oldie but a goodie.

People Love Dead Jews by the fabulously named Dara Horn - provocative title, highly productive reading. You WILL be the most interesting person at the neighborhood block party once you're done.

Finding the Words by Colin Campbell - heartbreaking and transformative as he shares his wisdom for grief and mourning.

We'll have a book list ready for you, *however*, this is also a moment to discover what you love. To try out different genres. To go through the stack of books by

your bedside table and commit to opening one. Be sure to take one of our Social Justice bookmarks so you don't lose your place!

God-willing, I start a 3 month sabbatical on November 1 and I'm excited to begin a *Banned Book reading challenge*. I'd love for you to join me.

Second, pick a reading buddy or we'll help you find one. Set up a *chevruta* and commit to reading one book together and then discussing.

Ask a friend, a partner, a child...if you have a dog like Six-Thirty, then ask your dog.

We have a group of moms from our *Shabbat B'yachad* program who meet in the park, every Sunday morning, and work their way through a book, *page by page*, discussing what they've read.

It's not dissimilar from a traditional Jewish practice called *Daf Yomi* where Jews around the world sync up their learning to read one page of Talmud a day.⁵

And when you finish *your* book, you should have a party like the *Daf Yomi* people, who after seven and a half years of reading together, rent out MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey for a giant celebration.

Or, you could sponsor an *oneg*.

Finally, we're setting up a book swap for Yom Kippur.

Bring ONE book to Royce Hall on Kol Nidrei or Yom Kippur morning and choose a new book to read...*and I'm completely comfortable with you reading it during services*. Especially if it displaces your phone.

But, let me be clear: Bring ONE book to swap which someone would *actually* enjoy reading. Do not bring illustrated cookbooks. That's just mean.

⁵ A Revolution in Jewish Learning, With Women Driving Change
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/04/world/middleeast/women-talmud-study.html>
 90,000 Jews Gather to Pray and Defy a Wave of Hate
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/01/nyregion/jewish-attacks-monsey-Daf-Yomi.html>

I know it takes effort to go back to the book when we've been away for so long. It won't come easy. So, in the New Year, let's return to the pages together.

Maryanne Wolf recommends 10 minutes a day to build up our muscles. 10 minutes a day of reading, and thanks to neuroplasticity, we can actually begin to repair our brains. The damage we've done can be mitigated and even healed.

What could be a better outcome as we look for ways to change our behavior in the New Year and seek to repair the mistakes we've made?

This is our season of change. And what science shows is that reading *changes our brains*. And, as Maryanne Wolf teaches: When you change the brain, you change the individual, which changes society, which changes the future of the species.⁶

We're ready for change. Let's do this together.

The Hardy Boys. Nancy Drew. Ramona Quimby. Holden Caulfield...these characters, and so many more, opened up worlds of curiosity, imagination, and possibility. I am who I am because of them.⁷

In recent years, I give thanks to authors like Tricia Hersey, Amy Bloom, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, and Viet Thanh Nguyen for helping me cross new thresholds of empathy and understanding.

And now I read books to my children, reading long past their bedtime, and I watch their minds expand.

⁶ "Literacy changes the brain, which changes the individual, which changes society, which changes the future of the species." Dr. Maryanne Wolf's presentation from TPR's Think Science event on February 22, 2019: "How the Internet Affects Your Brain."

⁷ A special shout out to Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield who prepared me so well for my arrival in Los Angeles 17 years ago.

“The enduring legacy of childhood's stories may begin with the simple magic woven by them, *but the understanding of ‘others’ imparted by them will stretch across the lifespan* and, if we are all very fortunate, influence how the next generation treats its fellow inhabitants on our shared planet.” Maryanne Wolf, Reader Come Home

In 5784, may we return home - to ourselves and to one another - as the People of the Book, hands open, pages ready...as we enter this New Year.

Shana Tova.

CLICK HERE FOR THE
READING CHALLENGE



Thank you:

To Rabbi Asher Knight, my wingman in writing High Holy Day sermons.

To Michele Lowe, the best sermon editor, coach, and cheerleader a rabbi could hope for...and, no, she didn't edit this line. 😊

To Maryanne Wolf, for calling me home.