

You Have a New Message: Finding God on Our Screens

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Broward Central Synagogue

One of the most beautiful instincts of Hasidism is the refusal to believe that **anything in the world is spiritually empty**. A Hasidic teaching, attributed sometimes to Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Friedman of Sadigura (1820-1883), tells of students who asked their Rebbe what could possibly be learned from the new technologies of his time. *“What can we learn from a **train**?”* one student asked. The Rebbe answered: *A person can miss an entire journey by arriving one moment too late. “And what can we learn from the **telegraph**?”* Every word matters, and every word carries a cost. *“And the **telephone**?”* What is spoken here can be heard somewhere far away.

180 years later the technology has changed. The train became the airplane. The telegraph became email, text messages, and WhatsApp. The telephone has become a small computer that rarely leaves our hands. But the Hasidic question remains: What can this teach us? If the Sadigura Rebbe was alive today, perhaps his students would no longer ask about trains and telegraphs. Perhaps they would place a smartphone before him, open a computer, sit him inside a self-driving car, and ask: **Rebbe, what can we learn from this?**

I want to suggest today that some of the messages appearing every day on our computers, telephones, tablets, watches, and cars may contain more than technical information. They may also awaken spiritual questions. Not because every notification is prophecy. Not because God personally caused your computer to freeze or your battery to reach nineteen percent. That would reduce Judaism to superstition. **But an ordinary message can become a sacred mirror when Torah teaches us how to read it.**

Perhaps God is talking to us through our screens—not because the screen itself is divine, but because no part of life is beyond our capacity to discover a divine lesson within it. **In the Bible, God speaks through a burning bush, through thunder and fire at Sinai, through dreams and visions, through a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. But then Elijah discovers something different.** Standing on the mountain, he experiences a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a fire—and God is not in any of them. **Only afterward comes the *kol demamah dakah*, the still, small voice. Perhaps that is closer to how God speaks to us today.** Not through burning bushes or splitting seas, not through thunder or fire, but through the quiet messages that appear in the ordinary places where we spend our lives. Maybe even through the screens we stare at every single day. **The question is not whether God has stopped sending messages. The question is whether we are still paying attention.**

In All Your Ways

The biblical foundation for this idea appears in Proverbs: בְּכָל־דִּרְכֶּיךָ דַּעֲהוּ יְהוָה וְיִשָּׁר אֲרֻחֶיךָ, ***“In all your ways, know God, and God will make your paths straight”*** (Proverbs 3:6). *B'chol derachecha da'ehu*. In all your ways. The verse could have said: Know God when you pray. Know God when you study Torah. Know God when you enter the synagogue. But it does not. It says *B'chol darchecha* – on every road you travel, in every corner of your life.

Judaism has never imagined holiness as a room that we enter and leave. Of course we search for God in Torah and prayer, in mitzvot and sacred community. But we are also asked to search for God in the ordinary texture of being alive: in our work and our families, in friendship and disappointment, in beauty and failure, in the questions we ask and in the world we are trying to understand.

Maimonides takes this idea remarkably seriously. When he asks what leads a human being to love and reverence for God, his answer is not simply: read more religious books. He writes that when we contemplate creation – its vastness, its wisdom, its astonishing complexity – something inside us begins to move toward wonder and awe (Mishneh Torah, *Foundations of the Torah* 2:2). **For Maimonides, the world itself can become a kind of sacred text.**

And elsewhere he takes *B'chol derachecha da'ehu* even further. **Eating, sleeping, working, exercising, caring for the body – none of these things are inherently outside the religious**

life. When they are directed toward wisdom, responsibility, and service, even the most ordinary acts become part of our relationship with God (*Human Dispositions* 3:3).

Perhaps this is one of Judaism's most radical ideas: **Torah is not only something we read. Torah teaches us how to read.** How to read a moment, another human being, history, nature, and even our own lives. And also a message on our screens.

The Bible itself constantly invites us to do exactly that. "Go to the ant," Proverbs tells the lazy person. "*Consider its ways and become wise*" (Proverbs 6:6). The Book of Job goes even further: "*Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the sky, and they will tell you. Speak to the earth, and it will teach you; the fish of the sea will inform you*" (Job 12:7-8). Think about the assumption behind those verses. Wisdom is already speaking. The question is whether we are paying attention.

King Solomon, the biblical symbol of wisdom, was remembered not only because he judged difficult cases or governed a kingdom. The Bible tells us that he spoke about trees, "from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop growing from the wall," and about animals, birds, creeping creatures, and fish (I Kings 5:13). Solomon looked at the world and apparently believed that nothing was beneath his attention.

The rabbis carried that intuition to an almost playful extreme. **Rabbi Yochanan teaches that even had the Torah never been given, human beings could have discovered certain forms of moral wisdom simply by observing creation: modesty from the cat, an aversion to theft from the ant, fidelity from the dove, and consideration in intimacy from the rooster (Eruvin 100b).** It is a strange passage, but a beautiful one. The rabbis are certainly not telling us that nature is morally perfect. Nature can be brutal. Animals can be violent. The world does not hand us a ready-made Torah. They are saying something subtler: **a person who knows how to look can learn from almost anything. Wisdom begins with attention.**

Perhaps that is why Pirkei Avot asks, "*Who is wise?*" and gives such an unexpected answer: **הלומד מכל אדם – the one who learns from every person** (Pirkei Avot 4:1). Not the person who knows everything, but the person who can learn from everyone, and everything we may add!

Hasidic Judaism would eventually push that idea one final step. The Baal Shem Tov taught that **everything a person sees or hears can contain an instruction for the service of God.** A

conversation overheard, a journey, a mistake, a machine, a delay, a coincidence, something beautiful, something irritating – all of it can become material for spiritual reflection.

Not because every event is a secret prophecy addressed personally to us. Judaism also demands reason, humility, Torah, and moral judgment. We are perfectly capable of projecting our own fears and desires onto the world and calling them the voice of God. **But the Baal Shem Tov was asking us to cultivate a different kind of consciousness: to stop moving through life as though most of what surrounds us were spiritually irrelevant.**

The spiritually awake person asks a different question. Not only, *What happened?* but also, **What might this have to teach me?**

That is the instinct behind so many old Hasidic stories. A train arrives, and the rebbe finds a lesson in it. A clock ticks, and there is something to learn about time. A new invention appears, and suddenly it becomes a metaphor for the human soul. **They were not worshipping technology. They were reading it.**

Learning from the Screens

And every generation has been given a different world to read. Our grandparents read trains and telegraphs. Our teachers read newspapers and radios. We live surrounded by another language, perhaps the most persistent language of our age: **the language of screens.**

They wake us in the morning. They travel in our pockets. They sit on our desks. They guide us through traffic. They tell us where to go, what we have forgotten, what is running out, what needs to be updated, what cannot be found, what connection has been lost.

And if *B'chol drachecha da'ehu* really means **in all your ways**, then perhaps it also means here. Perhaps even these messages can become teachers. Perhaps somewhere between **LOW BATTERY, CONNECTION LOST, UPDATE REQUIRED, and ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO DELETE THIS!**, there are questions our souls need to hear. Not because God has suddenly become a software engineer, but because Judaism has always taught us that when we learn how to pay attention, **the whole world can become a text, a living Torah, and almost anything can become a commentary on our lives.**

So this Rosh Hashanah, I want to invite you to do something unusual: to read our screens differently. Because perhaps, amid all the noise competing for our attention, some of the messages we dismiss every day are asking precisely the questions we most need to hear.

1. "Verify That You Are Human"

We have all seen the message: **"Verify that you are human."** Click the box. Find the traffic lights. Prove to the computer that you are not another computer. But Judaism asks for a harder verification. **Being biologically human is automatic. Behaving humanely is not.** How often this year did we react almost as if we were programmed – instantly defensive, predictably angry, seeing an argument instead of a person? Rosh Hashanah asks something harder: **Would the people who encountered me this year be able to verify my humanity by the way I treated them?**

2. "Running Low on Battery"

Our phones are remarkably attentive to their limits. At twenty percent, they warn us. At ten percent, we start looking for a charger. Yet we sometimes allow ourselves to live for weeks at three percent – exhausted, impatient, emotionally unavailable – and keep going as if depletion were a sign of importance. The prophet Elijah reached that point. Exhausted and overwhelmed, he sat beneath a tree and wanted to give up. God did not begin with theology or a new mission. An angel brought him food, water, and rest, saying: **"Rise and eat, for the journey is too great for you"** (I Kings 19:7). Sometimes the spiritual response is not to push harder, but to recharge. **What restores me – and why do I so often wait until I am almost empty before returning to it?**

3. "You Are Driving Without a Destination"

When I activate the self-driving system in my car without entering an address, the car can stay in its lane, adjust its speed, and avoid obstacles. It can keep moving – but it has no idea where I want to go. And that is also a spiritual warning: **a life can be busy, efficient, and constantly in motion while still lacking direction.** Pirkei Avot teaches: **"Know from where you came and where you are going"** (Avot 3:1). Rosh Hashanah asks us not to predict every turn in the road, but to choose a destination: What kind of person, family, community, and Jewish life are we trying to build? **If I continue on exactly the same road, is it taking me toward the life I actually want to live?**

4. "You Forgot to Send the Attachment"

We write, "Please see the attached document," press send, and the computer warns us: **"You forgot the attachment."** It has noticed that our words promise something our message does not contain. How often do we do the same? We say **"I love you,"** but forget to attach time.

"I'm sorry," but forget to attach change. We promise to be present, but forget to attach our attention. Pirkei Avot teaches: **"It is not the teaching that is primary, but the action"** (Avot 1:17). Even Judaism can be practiced without the attachment – ritual without intention, prayer without heart, values without action. **What did I say mattered this year – and did I attach my life to those words?**

5. "You Have Too Many Windows Open"

We know what happens when a computer has too many windows running at once: everything slows down. We do the same – unfinished conversations, postponed decisions, unresolved worries, old resentments. Even when we are not looking at them, they are still running in the background. Some windows need action. Some need mourning. Some need an honest conversation. And some simply need to be closed. **Not everything deserves to keep consuming our attention. Which window in my life most needs my attention – and which one is it finally time to close?**

6. "Connection Lost"

We have never had more ways to stay connected – and yet **"Connection Lost"** may describe more than a failure of Wi-Fi or 5G. We can message someone every day and still lose access to their inner life. We can belong to a synagogue and lose connection to prayer, Torah, community, Israel, or God. **Constant contact is not the same as connection.** And a lost connection is not necessarily a dead one; sometimes it begins to return with a call, an apology, a Shabbat dinner, or simply moving closer to the source. **Where in my life have I lost connection – and what small step could begin restoring it?**

7. "Password Expired"

Passwords protect us – until one day the system tells us: **"Password expired."** Human beings have passwords too: silence, control, anger, perfectionism, humor, distance. Many of them once protected us. But what kept us safe yesterday may be locking us out today. Teshuvah does not ask us to despise the person we were; it asks whether the habits that once served us still serve the person we are becoming. **What protection from my past has now become a barrier to my future?**

8. "Update Available"

Our devices regularly tell us: **“Update available.”** The old system is not worthless; it is simply unfinished. Errors can be repaired, vulnerabilities addressed, new possibilities opened. That is teshuvah: not believing that everything about us is wrong, but recognizing that something can still change. The problem is that updates are inconvenient, so we keep clicking: **“Remind me tomorrow.”** Pirkei Avot asks: **אם לא עכשיו, אימתי – “If not now, when?”** (Avot 1:14). Rosh Hashanah is the annual reminder that eventually tomorrow has to become today. **What change do I already know I need to make – and why am I still postponing it?**

9. “Storage Almost Full”

Our devices eventually warn us: **“Storage almost full.”** Before something new can enter, we have to decide what we still need to carry. Our inner storage fills too – with memories, disappointments, grief, guilt, old arguments, expectations, and versions of ourselves that no longer exist. Judaism is a civilization of memory; not everything should be deleted. Some memories root us. Some wounds must teach us. Some guilt must become apology and change. But not everything deserves permanent space. Ecclesiastes teaches that there is **“a time for keeping and a time for discarding”** (Ecclesiastes 3:6). **Teshuvah is not deleting the past. It is deciding how much space the past will occupy in our future.**

10. “Pinned Conversations”

Most messaging apps allow us to **pin** a conversation so that, even as new messages arrive and life moves on, it never disappears beneath everything else. I believe there are two conversations that Jewish life must keep pinned.

The first is **Israel**. After October 7, many of us followed every development constantly. Then daily life returned. That is why Israel must remain pinned: not because it should dominate every conversation, but because it should never disappear from Jewish consciousness. It should remain part of our homes, our synagogue, and the conversations we have with our children and grandchildren – not through slogans, but through mature, informed, complex conversation. **Pinning Israel means that even when the headlines fade, the relationship remains central.**

The second is **antisemitism** – and this one I wish we could unpin. I would rather fill that space with more Torah, Shabbat, Israel, creativity, community, and Jewish joy. But history has taught us that we cannot yet ignore it. We must recognize antisemitism, confront it, and teach the next generation how to respond to it. But keeping it pinned does not mean letting it occupy the entire screen.

Israel remains pinned because it represents the Jewish future we want to build. Antisemitism remains pinned because it is a danger we still need to confront. One reminds us what we are fighting for; the other, what we sometimes still have to fight against.

11. "Recalculating"

There is one final message that I find especially Jewish. You miss the turn. You continue in the wrong direction. **The navigation system does not become angry. It does not say: "I told you so." It does not spend the next twenty minutes describing the road you should have taken. It looks at where you are now and says one word: "Recalculating." That is teshuvah.**

We cannot begin from the road we should have taken ten years ago. We cannot begin from the conversation we should have had, the decision we should have made, or the person we wish we had been. We can begin only from our present location. The Jewish message is not that every wrong turn is harmless. Some detours cost us time. Some choices damage relationships. Some roads are difficult to leave. **Teshuvah may require confession, apology, restitution, patience, and the acceptance that not everything can be restored exactly as it was. But as long as we are alive, our present location does not have to become our final destination.** Recalculating means that another route remains possible.

Conclusion

***B'chol drachecha da'ehu.* Know God in all your ways. Not only in the obvious places. Not only in the synagogue. Not only in Torah, but through the eyes Torah gives us. Not only in the words of a prophet, but in the wisdom of an ant, the silence of the heavens, the whistle of a train, the ringing of a telephone, the warning on a battery, the failure of a connection, and the recalculation of a road.**

Shanah Tovah

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