

## **DOING NOTHING –Rosh Hashana Eve 5780**

**Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

**Tonight, I am going to propose a radical idea.**

**I am going to suggest that we take some time to do something extremely important. ---**

**I am going to suggest that we take some time to do nothing. Yes, that is correct.**

**I am suggesting that we spend more time doing nothing.**

**I have been inspired by a new book written by the artist and writer, Jenny Odell. It's called:**

**How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy.**

**I think you will recognize her analysis from your own life.**

**Odell argues that social media captures**

**way too much of our attention. And it is a frantic,**

**anxiety producing attention, pushing us to respond**

**to an overabundance of stimuli. Facebook, Instagram,**

**Twitter are designed to keep us online, to keep us clicking**

**and reacting in rapid fire because, the more we engage,**

**the more profitable the platform.**

**In other words, as the various platforms feed us information, they are a drug to which we become addicted, making us return over and over again for more. The more outrageous and upsetting the post, the more we react, and the more we click to feed our habit.**

**Coupled with this attention drain is the sense that, because we are wired in all the time, we can also be “productive” all the time. It is difficult to be on vacation when your employer can get a hold of you through email, texts, Messenger -- all thanks to your smart phone.**

**Just recounting the pace of our lives today is exhausting!**

**The result is that we do not have time to think through the urgent issues of the day. We don't have time for our friends and sometimes, even, for our family.**

**Our discourse becomes filled with over-simplifications rather than with nuanced arguments. Instead of giving serious consideration to what is most important to us, we are distracted by what Odell calls “the excess of banal content”<sup>1</sup> we receive through social media.**

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<sup>1</sup> P. 164

**As an alternative, Odell suggests “doing nothing as a deprogramming device.”<sup>2</sup> By nothing what she means is being present to what is going on around us.**

**For example, she suggests practicing the technique of Deep Listening developed by musician Pauline Oliveros.**

**She “defines the practice as ‘listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear, no matter what you are doing.**

**Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, of one’s thoughts as well as musical sounds.’**

**She distinguishes between listening and hearing:**

**‘To hear is the physical means that enables perception.**

**To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.’**

**The goal and the reward of Deep Listening**

**is a heightened sense of receptivity and a reversal**

**of our usual cultural training, which teaches us to quickly analyze and judge more than simply observe.”<sup>3</sup>**

**Interestingly, we have such advice in Judaism.**

**Our central prayer, the Shema, tells us to “Listen, Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.” Have you ever thought about what that really means?**

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<sup>2</sup> P. 22

<sup>3</sup> P. 7

**It means, “Listen, Pay attention!**

**We are all part of the greater One.”**

**We need to recognize the oneness of humanity.**

**It is by listening to each other that we will hear God.**

**Let’s stop for a moment and take 30 seconds to do just that.**

**[30 seconds]**

**That was probably uncomfortable for some, but**

**you may have noticed sounds that you never had before.**

**Just think of all the sights and sounds we miss every day!**

**Lest you think that sitting back and observing is a waste**

**of our time, or a luxury for those who can afford it,**

**you may want to watch a charming documentary**

**called “The Biggest Little Farm.” Because this farm**

**is thriving as a result of just this kind of attitude.**

**Filmmaker John Chester and his wife, Molly,**

**a private chef, rescue a dog named Todd.**

**They promise him that he will never have**

**to find another home. Unfortunately,**

**when they are away from their Santa Monica apartment,**

**Todd barks up a storm. The neighbors complain,**

**and the Chesters are faced with the choice**

**of giving up Todd or moving.**

**They decide to follow their dream, and buy a farm in Ventura County. The challenge is that the land is as dry and hard as rock. The Chesters are successful in making the land fertile thanks to “their agricultural guru, Alan York, who preaches ‘diversity, diversity, diversity.’ That means 75 varieties of stone fruit in the orchard, and animals that include cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, and bees.”<sup>4</sup> The Chesters’ farm is biodynamic – in the words of the Los Angeles Times, “It’s a holistic approach in which every animal, plant, pest and poop on the farm serves a purpose — everything contributes to a self-sustaining life cycle.” “The animals’ excrement nourishes the revived dirt, which is maintained by ground-cover plants, which are kept well trimmed by hungry sheep.”<sup>5</sup>**

**Unfortunately, as their trees begin to bear fruit, pests begin to proliferate -- in addition there are weather challenges, predators, and diseases.**

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<sup>4</sup> [www.npr.org/2019/05/08/721464968/documentary-offers-eco-conscious-farm-wisdom-biggest-little-farm](http://www.npr.org/2019/05/08/721464968/documentary-offers-eco-conscious-farm-wisdom-biggest-little-farm)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**The cover crop, for example, is a mix of grasses, clover and legumes...the clover attracts gophers that chew away the roots of the young orchard trees. Then there are the coyotes, who dine on the farm's chickens. Here is where the practice of doing nothing is key. Through careful and patient observation, John Chester is able to take care of both the gophers and the coyotes. He "eventually realize[s] that nature already provided a counterbalance to gophers, in an animal he'd previously loathed: coyotes." Once the coyotes are able to feast on the gophers, the coyotes stopped feeding on the chickens, and the tree roots are no longer destroyed by the gophers.**

**Another example of close observation leading to a solution: When snails begin to eat their lemon trees, rather than using pesticides, the Chesters observe that the ducks on the farm eat snails – so they set the ducks up to take care of the snails.**

**Doing nothing allows you to observe people too. The writer David Foster Wallace gave a powerful commencement speech at Kenyon College some years ago.**

**It focused on getting out of our automatic assumptions and paying real attention to those around us.**

**He said: “[M]ost days, if you’re aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at this fat, dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she’s not usually like this. Maybe she’s been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer.**

**Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness.**

**Of course, none of this is likely, but it’s also not impossible. It just depends on what you want to consider...**

**if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.”<sup>6</sup>**

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<sup>66</sup> fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/

**In that spirit, I have another practice to suggest:  
observing Shabbat. Shabbat is our weekly gift.**

**It is a time to be, and not to do. Rabbi Abraham Joshua  
Heschel describes it this way:**

**“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather  
than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of  
things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned  
to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon  
to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of  
creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of  
creation to the creation of the world.”**

**It is our day to do nothing, to marvel at the world,  
to pay close attention to everything, to see and to hear  
what Creation has to offer us.**

**So: Listen, O Israel, let us a break from our devices.**

**Let us take the time to appreciate our surroundings and  
those within it. Let us spend some time doing nothing.**