

[Open with Googling/phone shtick]

That's what we do nowadays: when we want to know something — anything from the average rainfall in the Amazon to directions to a friend's house to what's going on in Israel — we Google it, and find out everything about anything. The internet has become our news source, our teacher, and our doctor. Expert advice along with scores of information that was once challenging to come by is now easily searchable and accessible within moments.

The problem is when we search for something on the internet, we are not, in fact, looking at everything. The internet that I see is not the same one as you see and not the same one as the person next to you. If we were to each go home and Google Rosh Hashanah some of us would see more results about holiday how-to, others would see news stories and still others would see more recipes and crafts. Google decides what information to show us based on what it thinks we want to read, Bing shows us what our friends are reading. Search results are not the same for everyone and we don't know what is being edited out by these search algorithms. While personalized search makes it easier to find what we are looking for, the cost is our objectivity.

When we're offline, we choose the lenses with which we view the world, we choose our own filters. We know that even choosing a news channel means picking a perspective; we know what to expect when we watch Glen Beck or Rachel Maddow. We know what to expect when we turn to Jon Stewart. The problem is that when we choose what to watch we make the decision, we know what we are choosing from. When search engines choose for us we don't know what is not there, we don't know what we are missing and we don't even know what to look for.

Author Eli Pariser calls this problem the Filter Bubble — and explains why it is so dangerous.

First the filter bubble surrounds us with ideas with which we're already familiar (and already agree), making us overconfident in our beliefs. Second, it removes from our environment some of the key prompts, like novelty that make us want to learn.¹

We naturally gravitate toward information that confirms what we already believe about the world — our brains are wired to respond favorably when something we know is proven true. Think of how great it feels when your husband or wife says “your right dear”.² This is called Confirmation Bias, we put more weight on evidence that supports our views. And once we've been proven right, our brain tells us we're done, and we are likely to dismiss evidence that contradicts us. We trust the experts that agree with what we already believe and find fault with those who disagree.

Instead of opening the world and making our world view larger, we are narrowing our focus to what we already know. This isn't the pursuit of knowledge; it's the closing down of our minds.

By definition, a world constructed from the familiar is a world in which there's nothing to learn. When we are only exposed to what we know, we stop coming into contact with the mind-blowing, preconception-shattering experiences and ideas that change how we think about the world and ourselves.³ We get stuck in a feedback loop of information that only confirms what we believe, and no longer challenges us. And when we combine this personalization of information

¹ Pariser, Eli (2011-05-12). The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You (p. 84). The Penguin Press. Kindle Edition.

² <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-certainty-bias&page=2>

³ Pariser, Eli (2011-05-12). The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You (p. 15). The Penguin Press. Kindle Edition.

with our natural preference to gravitate toward things we already agree with, we stop learning.

The filter bubble tends to dramatically amplify confirmation bias. Consuming information that conforms to our ideas of the world is easy and pleasurable; consuming information that challenges us to think in new ways or question our assumptions is frustrating and difficult. This is why partisans of one political stripe tend not to consume the media of another. An information environment built on our past choices will favor information that supports our existing notions about the world rather than challenging these notions.⁴

The filter bubble has also led to a more polarized society — it seems that we can no longer have a conversation with anyone who does not agree with us. Our national politics have become increasingly divisive. The tone of debate is decidedly uncivil and disrespectful and has gotten to a point that politicians of differing parties can not even be polite to each other, let alone listen to opposing viewpoints. When member of our Armed Forces is booed on television and no one in the studio blinks an eye, we have lost something precious.

Pariser, a self-identified liberal, talks about how he noticed that all his conservative friends had disappeared from his Facebook page⁵ — he was clicking on the links and posts of his liberal friends more often, and Facebook's algorithms learned to eliminate his conservative friends from his newsfeed. Instead of being exposed to other viewpoints, the friend who would challenge him were hidden from him. Facebook makes it easier to connect with those who are the most similar to us — instead of opening up our circle of friends, it narrows our focus to those who are most like us.

⁴ Pariser, Eli (2011-05-12). *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You* (p. 88). The Penguin Press. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Pariser, Eli (2011-05-12). *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You* (p. 5). The Penguin Press. Kindle Edition

Once we realize that we consciously and unconsciously surround ourselves with things we know and people we agree with, how do we pop the bubble?

Not surprisingly, we can find an answer in Jewish tradition.

Proverbs teaches that, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who listens to counsel is wise.” While it may be our instinct to surround ourselves with things that are familiar — and it’s apparent that our technology only reinforces this instinct — Judaism teaches us that it is foolish to do so. We need to grow beyond what we already know.

The Talmud can point the way for us as well. Not in its content, but in the way it *presents* its content. The Talmud doesn’t just tell us the answers to our questions — it preserves minority opinions and presents losing arguments.

The Talmud is not a list of Jewish laws; it is a record of the conversations between rabbis about what the law should be. Two of the most well known rabbis who argued with each other about Jewish Law are Hillel and Shammai; the Talmud records over 300 arguments between their two schools of thought. They had dramatically different interpretations of Jewish law, and while Hillel is almost always the winner of their arguments, the Talmud preserves the opinion of Shammai. The Talmud explains why in this story:

For three years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel argued. One asserted, “The law agrees with our views,” and the other asserted, “The law agrees with our views.” The voice of God came down and announced, “They are both the words of the living God, but the law agrees with the School of Hillel.”

The Talmud then goes on to ask the obvious question: since both were the words of the living God, why does the law agree with Hillel? And why does it agree with him nearly every single time? The Talmud tells us that because the School of Hillel was kind and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Shammai — and not only that, but when making an argument they mentioned the rulings of Shammai before their own.⁶

The Talmud makes it clear that one of the reasons that Hillel always wins is because he made an effort to understand the other side; seeking out dissenting opinions and welcoming challenges to his opinions. By saying that both opinions are the words of the living God, the Talmud is teaching us that we need to respect other viewpoints. Even if they are wrong, we do not ridicule them.

The Talmud also teaches us that when the students of the schools of Hillel and Shammai became arrogant and narrowed their focus there was an increase in unresolved disputes. The rabbis understood that when you only study the materials that confirm what you already know, you become more entrenched in your opinion. The more firmly you are entrenched in your own opinion, the less likely you are to even acknowledge another opinion. When the students of Hillel and Shammai stopped listening to each other and stopped considering alternate opinions the Talmud tells us that things became so chaotic that the Torah was almost split in two — that Jewish law was almost split into two different religions. Not because of multiple opinions, but because of refusal to acknowledge that there might be truth in another opinion.⁷

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

⁷ - not a direct quote, but influenced by <http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/Levi.pdf>

We join together on Rosh Hashanah to break this cycle — to shake ourselves out of what is comfortable and familiar. We have to stop hiding. We come to be unsettled because that is how we grow and change.

We have to pop our bubble, to check and evaluate our filters, to let go of untruths we keep telling ourselves, to open up to other ideas, to stop repeating only that which we want to hear. We have to listen to those ideas that challenge our beliefs and opinions in order to learn and grow. The shofar calls us to listen to the things we don't want to hear, to face the things we would rather avoid.

In these ten days of Teshuvah between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are called upon to confront the things that are difficult — those times in the past year when we strayed from our best selves, when we didn't act or react as we wish we had. And we do this with some of our most troubling liturgy that isn't always consistent with our ideas about God and Judaism.

Most of the year we talk about God with easy analogies and comfortable metaphors. God is our light and our source of strength, we say. God is a source of healing and comfort. God is the force behind nature, and our inspiration to speak out for social justice. Even when we struggle with God, and even for those who don't believe in God, our usual metaphors are comfortable and familiar.

On Rosh Hashanah these comfortable metaphors are replaced by more demanding ones. We read that God is a judge, a strict parent, a micromanaging ruler who watches our every move. This is much more challenging; it forces us to acknowledge a different kind of relationship with God, and a different sense of who we are.

The words in our High Holiday prayerbook force us to stop making excuses and encourage us to take responsibility for our actions. These words force us to face how our actions and inactions affect others. They force us to accept that no matter what we do, there are some things that we cannot control. When our prayers focus on a judgmental and controlling God we are uncomfortable because it means that we are being judged. It means that we are, in many ways, powerless.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote that when he was a boy he was taught that Rosh Hashanah is God's coronation. What does it mean if every year we have to confer kingship on God? It means we have to struggle with God and reaffirm what we believe. Rosh Hashanah forces us to acknowledge that we are not the center of the universe. We may act that way much of the time, and focus on feedback that confirms this opinion. "How does this affect me?" we ask. "What does this mean to my situation?" But on Rosh Hashanah we are reminded that there is much more in existence than just us. And though our actions are meaningful and powerful, it is because of their effect on others that they have any importance at all.

For some, it is easier to dismiss God on Rosh Hashanah — to hide from what is truly awesome and powerful about this day — to hide behind our filter. To settle for comfort instead of growth. To keep going along as we always have, in our comfortable little bubble.

But that is why we are here today — to break out of the bubble. By stepping through the doors of this sanctuary we willingly take on the introspection of the High Holidays needed to break us out of the complacency of our daily lives.

The sound of the shofar should pop our bubble — it should break through the barriers that we have built around us. The sound of the shofar should unsettle us, unnerve us, and make us tremble.

Because we have to allow ourselves to be exposed, we have to become vulnerable to grow. We have to do the difficult work if we genuinely want to change in this new year.

It is always easier to live in the bubble, to protect ourselves from ideas that challenge what we believe. Yes, the internet creates a bubble around us that we are often not even aware of, but we often intentionally enclose ourselves in a bubble of our own making. We can't just surround ourselves with what is comfortable and what we know, we must challenge ourselves and struggle. We have to force ourselves to grow, to stretch beyond what we know. We have to confront that which we fear; we have to seek out differing opinions; we have to face the challenge of living outside our comfort zone.

May the call of the shofar open our ears to the things we don't want to hear.
May this new year open our eyes to the things we would rather ignore. May our prayer together inspire us to stretch beyond what we already think we know.
May this new year be a year of learning and growing.

Shanah Tova.