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I have a deep devotion to the exercise of Torah study. When I was sixteen years old, I decided to become a rabbi, and the first step that I identified on my path to the rabbinate was attending weekly Torah study classes at my temple. As a student at Middlebury College, I found myself missing Torah study so much that I founded the school's first Torah study group.

I love that no matter how many times I read a Torah portion, there is something new to discover. I love that the same line of Torah can mean different things to me each time I encounter it. I love that I have studied Torah for fifteen years and can still expect to struggle and be inspired every time I sit down with the text.

My abiding love of Torah study does not keep me from admitting that there are many sections of the Hebrew Bible that feel remote or even irrelevant to my life in the twenty-first century. It can sometimes take a lot of work to move from the ancient words to contemporary meaning, and sometimes I just can't get there.

But, even though it can take a lot of effort and a lot mental flexibility, most of the time, I can make the leap and find ways to understand and appreciate even the most remote text.

Sometimes though, a verse will jump off the page and fly straight into my soul. It's hard to predict what kind of verses will have this immediate appeal. Because I have studied with the same chumash, or copy of the Torah, since I was a sophomore in college, reading the text includes reading the notes that I have written in the margins over the past decade or so.

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Those notes show me that verses that faded into the background on previous readings now seem to shine and shimmer. And then there are those verses that I know will resonate with me no matter how many times I encounter them. Finding a verse like that is a special experience.

Today, I want to share with you one of those timeless, powerful verses. I encountered these words for the first time several months ago while I was preparing for our Torah study class.

This past year, our group decided that instead of reading the weekly parashah, or Torah portion, we would read the Haftarah portion assigned to each week. This switch meant that each Saturday morning, we spent time exploring the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible rather than the five books of the Torah.

So- I was sitting in my office, with my Haftarah commentary open and my highlighter poised and ready to be used, and I started reading the Haftarah portion assigned to that week which happened to have been from the book of Jeremiah.

In the opening verses of the portion, Jeremiah addressed the Israelites on God's behalf- asking the people why they had abandoned God. It was in this section of text that I found the verse that has since lodged itself into my mind and my heart.

Speaking to the people in God's voice, Jeremiah cried out:

“What wrong did your ancestors find in Me, that they moved away from Me, ***and went after empty things and themselves became empty?***” (Jeremiah 2:5)

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It was simple and short, and I couldn't stop thinking about this idea that the people had gone after empty things and become empty themselves.

I looked up the Hebrew word "chevel" which I first saw translated as "empty" and learned that it can also be rendered as "deluded," "vain," and "worthless."

That means that depending on which translation you use, Jeremiah accused the Israelites of having followed empty, deluded, vain, and worthless things and, in so doing, having become empty, deluded, vain, and worthless themselves.

Later in the Haftarah portion, Jeremiah continued to speak from God's perspective as he railed against the Israelites' having abandoned God in favor of things that they thought were godlike.

He said to them: "For My people have done a twofold wrong: They have forsaken Me, the Fount of living waters, And hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, Which cannot even hold water." (Jeremiah 2:13)

I read these verses, highlighted them, and then sat back in my chair and just absorbed them. It's not as if I had never encountered the prophets' arguments against idolatry and the abandonment of God. But, for some reason, reading these compact but powerful verses knocked me off my game and forced me to stop working and to start thinking.

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Since that moment, several months ago, these words have been taking up space in my mind and in my heart. And so, today, I want to share what I have learned from the time that I have spent looking at the world through the lens of these verses.

The prohibition against idolatry is one of the most famous commandments in the Jewish Tradition. But, even though it is one that I have read and read about hundreds of times, it wasn't until I considered why Jeremiah's words resonated so powerfully for me, that I realized how relevant the commandment is to our contemporary community.

Now, I know that you're most likely thinking some version of the following, "Yes, everyone knows that idolatry is bad, but I'm not an idolater so I don't need to listen to any more of this." I understand that reaction, but I disagree with it strongly. I think that every one of us here today is guilty of idolatry.

In Exodus, idolatry is defined as the worship of sculpted images or of gods other than the God of Israel. But what we often forget is that worship does not happen only in synagogues or temples, and idolatry is not limited to kneeling in front of idols. What we often forget is that worship can be understood as the allocation of our most precious resources- namely our time and our attention.

Our tradition teaches us that idolatry is the worship of empty things. Therefore, when we give vain, deluded, and worthless things our time and energy, we are guilty of idolatry and are at risk of becoming empty ourselves.

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In 1985, Neil Postman published his prophetic book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. In his opening chapter, Postman framed his argument by contrasting George Orwell and Aldous Huxley's visions of the future as they are presented in *1984* and *A Brave New World* respectively.

Postman explained:

“[In 1984,] Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity, and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

...Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance... In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.”

Postman was unabashedly direct when he wrote, “...a great ... shift has taken place in America, with the result that the content of much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense.”

In just over one hundred and fifty pages, Postman argued persuasively that the way television is structured and consumed in this country is making everyone less able and also less willing to engage meaningfully with anything. Worse still, in Postman's mind, is that we are unaware of this ongoing emptying-out of our capabilities.

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Postman wrote about the world as he saw it in the 1980's, but he could have just as easily been talking about our world today. He, like Jeremiah before him, cried out that we are, once again, unable to distinguish between those things that are meaningful and those that are empty. And, in an echo of Jeremiah's message, Postman attempted to explain to us that because we have been chasing empty things, we have become empty ourselves.

Amusing Ourselves to Death is the product of its time in that it speaks mostly about both the insidious and the overt danger of the spread of and our reliance on television. However, it's easy to see that Postman's warnings are even more relevant today. For example, what he identified as the ability of "show business" to remake everything in its image is even more concerning when we consider that the devices that provide us with "show business" have only become more omnipresent in the years since the book's publication.

I started reading *Amusing Ourselves to Death* around the same time that as I was preparing to teach Jeremiah's words at Torah Study. And, because of this coincidence of time, Postman's words registered as a clear modernization of both Jeremiah's warning to the Israelite people and his condemnation of their behavior.

I want all of us to think of our weekly calendar and how we allocated the hours of each day. I want us to take just a moment to consider who we spent the longest amount of time talking to; what we spent the most time doing; and how we felt when we got back into our beds each night.

Did we speak with our loved ones more than we watched television?

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Did we sit in silence for even a moment and reflect on our actions?

Did we discuss serious topics with someone who we respect and are challenged by?

Did we take time out of our day to show up for a neighbor or a friend in need?

Did we end the day feeling content or satisfied by what we had done since we woke up that morning?

Did we end the week feeling more or less empty?

Belonging to a Jewish community means engaging with these questions. Belonging means embracing the challenge to shape our lives around meaning and value. Belonging means orienting our days around Jewish values and Jewish time.

Belonging means stopping yourself from ignoring what I'm saying right now because you think I just want you to come to services more often.

I love services, but I also love that Judaism is much more than services.

Living Jewishly and honoring Jewish values can mean many different things.

It can mean prioritizing your family time over everything else in your lives.

It can mean dedicating one Saturday a month to volunteering so that you can help repair the world.

It can mean setting aside time to study and to engage with intellectual challenges.

It can mean teaching children that they have the ability to shape the world and then helping them make their dreams and the dreams of others reality.

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It can mean rejecting the pressures of those outside voices who argue that time spent on strengthening yourself and your family is time that you have wasted.

It can mean honoring the concept of Shabbat by putting down your phones, turning off the television, and simply learning how to be at peace with yourself.

It can mean being very purposeful and intentional when you interact with other people- never failing to search for the reflection of God in their eyes.

It can mean challenging yourself to learn more about who you are and what you believe in.

When we commit to living Jewish lives we prioritize that which fills us with meaning. We embrace the responsibility of taking our Judaism with us when we walk out of the front doors of our synagogue.

When we worship empty things, we become empty.

When we worship empty things, we take on other people's standards and forget our own.

When we worship empty things, we become drained of our power, and we forget that we have the ability to shape our lives.

When we worship empty things, we exist but we do not thrive.

This year, I challenge us to shine a light on all aspects of our lives and to consider whether we are committing idolatry by giving the best of ourselves- our time, our potential, our love- to things that do not deserve it. I challenge us to ruthlessly strip away from our lives that which empties our spirits. I challenge us to seek out and embrace those aspects of our faith and our tradition that **fill** us with meaning.