

“Stop — For God’s Sake”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In his essay on the great Vilna Gaon, Louis Ginzburg wrote that the Gaon “declared it to be a religious duty and inviolable obligation of every person to fix a certain time of the day for reflection and meditation.” Ginzburg, himself a great scholar, writes about one of the very greatest Jewish scholars, the Gaon: both insist there comes a time to put the books away.

For our day, there comes a time as well to put away the iPod, the blackberry, the television and the computer. Every innovation tempts us — or better, robs us — of the space and silence needed for reflection. A person who cannot put his feet up on a desk and stare out a window, or warm her hands on a cup of tea while thoughts wander, is a slave. Not a slave in the classical sense, but a slave to distraction, to the flash and dazzle of the screen, to the glitter of life that erodes quiet contemplation. The Gaon reminds us that such contemplation is not merely a luxury, but a “religious duty.”

Pirke Avoth records that, “Moses received the Torah from Mount Sinai.” What did Sinai contribute? According to the commentator Abravanel, the experience of being on Sinai — the solitude and meditation — prepared Moses to receive the Torah. We all need such mountaintop moments each day. Stop, so you can receive.