



Ki Teitzei
Cookie Monster
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Have you ever had the experience where you go shopping for a new couch, look up prices and options online, and then a few days later, realize that you are now being followed by ads for couches all over the internet? Literally you go to check the news and there on the side of your screen is an annoying ad for couches.

Or, this happened to me just this week—my sister is a passionate animal lover. She sends me videos of daring animal rescues on a regular basis. Because she's my sister, and because I love her, I always watch the videos she sends. But, if I'm being completely honest, I wouldn't seek out animal rescue videos on my own. So it caught me by surprise when I noticed recently that my entire Facebook newsfeed has been inundated with videos from Hope for Paws and Black Jaguar White Tiger. Facebook has even started highlighting my friend's animal-related posts. To be clear—not a problem, just not the internet world I would have chosen.

And then, my favorite is when you make a big purchase online. Let's say hypothetically you've been agonizing over which shoes to wear to a wedding, and then you finally pick shoes, submit them to the bride for approval, buy them, take the tags off and wear them, and still the internet keeps sending you pictures of all the shoes you could have gotten as if to torment you. Look, here's a pair that matches better and is cheaper...

Turns out that there is a simple explanation for why we are all being stalked by the ghost of our online shopping past. It's the cookie monster.

Of course, this isn't the insatiable blue, gravelly-voiced monster on Sesame Street who is constantly stuffing his face with chocolate-chip cookies and spraying crumbs all over the ground. This cookie monster is more like a Bubbie mafia, secretly shoving bugged cookies into your handbag while you look the other way.

That's what I learned when I turned to a very helpful article called, "Are Targeted Ads Stalking You? Here's How to Make them Stop," which appeared in the New York Times this week. Apparently, when companies hire marketing professionals these days, they are often paying for tracking devices, called cookies, to be hidden secretly on their website. When you, the unsuspecting shopper, peruse the page, these cookies leap into your browser and hide out watching you. They can tell how long you look at a page, and what you're looking at, and then send out signals to companies with matching stock to send you targeted ads. That's why your entire internet experience often feels so personalized.

Do you find this disturbing? Don't like the thought of big brother watching you? The good news is that if you can find all those stowaway cookies and delete them from your browser, your internet experience will return to the world of unending possibilities it once was.

And here's where it gets interesting. As I was reading this article, I couldn't help myself—I started thinking about how very Jewish it is to recognize the power of cookies. We are taught that over the course of a year, we pick up behaviors and patterns which function like cookies in our psyches. We have a drink after a difficult day of work, and then that behavior pattern repeats itself the next day and the next until our after-work ritual involves drinking before we've even consciously made that choice. We have a conflict with a friend and, when we can't seem to work it out, we stop talking and start avoiding them beyond the time when we even

remember what the conflict was about. We make a self-deprecating joke, get a laugh, and before long we are disparaging ourselves in public on a regular basis.

In many ways, our lives are dictated by the unconscious cookies we pick up along the way which direct our behavior and steer us towards where we've been before. Rosh Hashana is the helpful article which appears in our midst and says to us, *would you like a fresh browsing experience? Do you really want all those cookies?*

And when you decide that you've got some cookies you're ready to part with, how do you delete the cookies of the soul? Unlike in our internet browsers, there is no easy-to-click button; no ad-blocking ap to install. Instead, we have to take the time to sit with ourselves and evaluate where we are at in this moment. Am I living out my full potential? What is preventing me from realizing my dreams? How can I be a better employee/partner/parent/friend?

When I was growing up, I remember that we spent considerable time preparing for the High Holidays in religious school. We were taught that you can't ask God for forgiveness until you've done the work to repair your relationships with others. In fact, our teachers loved to go over the Mishna from Yoma.

After a while, I didn't feel like these blanket apologies were cool anymore, though, so I stopped giving them and didn't renew the practice until my first year of rabbinical school, when I was again feeling super dedicated. That year, I sent out letters to all of my family and friends, explaining that Rosh Hashana requires us to work out all of our conflicts and apologizing for anything I might have done to hurt them. I was surprised when almost every single person wrote me back immediately with the question—are you mad at me for something? Did I do something to hurt you and you're just not telling me?

I realized in this moment that there are two types of cookies. There are the cookies that you didn't choose and don't really want, the cookies of unconscious action, conflicts and bad behavior that lead us astray and must be cleared out. And there are the cookies that you bake when you're trying to sell a house; the cookies that you set out in the hopes that they will lead you towards blessing.

These days, I spend the month of Elul purging and baking. Purging old cookies by working out the conflicts I know about and doing self-work to prepare for the new year. And baking. Instead of sending notes of apology *in case* I've hurt someone, I try to write letters to the people I love most telling them what I love about them and what I hope we can do together in the new year.

The other night, Solomon and I were getting ready for Shabbos. I mixed up some gluten-free, dairy-free chocolate chip cookies and put them in the oven. As they baked, the whole house started to smell delicious. And I realized in that moment, that's what the holidays are all about. This is the season of baking cookies.

What's in your oven?