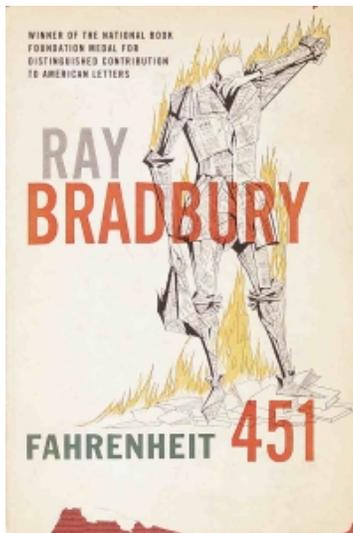




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The news that science fiction author Ray Bradbury died yesterday at age 91 was a moment of pause and reflection for me. Not that I was such a huge Bradbury fan, or even a reader of sci-fi in general (despite having been a bookish kid, and a devoted Trekkie). In fact, aside from a few short stories I can't otherwise recall, the only thing I had ever seriously read of Bradbury's was *Fahrenheit 451* – and that as a ninth grader in 1984. Perhaps some curriculum planner noting the year decided freshman lit should cover the dystopian novels, starting with Orwell's foreboding prophecy about the year we were living through. Perhaps it was because the Cold War was not yet over, and the cautionary tales of *Animal Farm* and the like were part of our indoctrination against anti-American worldviews.

Last year I had occasion to revisit my high school reading lists through my work at ATID with Prof. William Kolbrener on a soon-to-be published research project on the English literature curriculum, and how it can and should be a vehicle to advance the larger goals of Jewish education. I had remembered *Fahrenheit 451* as a dark tale of a future in which books had become outlawed, and firemen no longer extinguish fires, but confiscate contraband books and burn them (451° F being the temperature at which paper ignites). But, because I conflated the novel with the larger dystopian genre, I completely misremembered the essence of the plot, mistakenly thinking that it depicts a totalitarian regime, whose Thought Police suppress the imaginative powers of literature as a tool of propaganda and thought control.



So last year, on revisiting Bradbury's 1953 novel I was surprised to discover that's not the plot of *Fahrenheit 451* at all (how many of you similarly misremembered?). Unlike 1984's screens in each home allowing Big Brother to keep an eye on everyone, the homes in *Fahrenheit 451* are covered in parlor screens on each wall, a kind of interactive chat room and delivery system for incessant bursts of short entertaining nuggets. When away from the screen people have "audio seashells" or "thimble radios" that fit snugly in the ear to pipe-in entertainment. With society's collective brain atrophied, books are viewed with great suspicion in an increasingly anti-intellectual world. The Fire Chief Beatty explains to the novel's hero, Montag, "There you have it. It didn't come from the government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship, to start with, no! Technology, mass

exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them you can stay happy all the time... [Firemen, i.e. book burners, are] custodians of our peace of mind... People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life? I want to be happy, people say. Well, aren't they? Don't we keep them moving, don't we give them fun? That's all we

live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these."

Montag meets Faber, a former English professor who suffers under the guilty weight of not having defended books before it was too late. In explaining the virtues of reading he suggests that it is the best access to leisure. "Oh, but we've plenty of off-hours," counters Montag, to which the professor responds:

Off-hours, yes. But time to think? If you're not driving a hundred miles an hour, at a clip where you can't think of anything else but the danger, then you're playing some game or sitting in some room where you can't argue with the four-wall televisor. Why? The televisor is 'real.' It is immediate, it has dimension it tells you what to think and blasts it in, it *must* be right. It seems so right. It rushes you on so quickly to its own conclusions your mind hasn't time to protest, 'What nonsense!'

Bradbury is asking us why anyone would want to read – really read widely and deeply, not just the comic books the novel's firemen still allow – when we might rather watch cats play with a piece of string or see Charlie bite a finger a half billion times.

But reading *is* a crucially important component of an engaged life, and especially so for those aspiring to be thinking *religious* people. I recall entering the Yeshiva University library for the first time and being stopped in my tracks by the quote from R. Yehuda Ibn-Tibon that once graced the old entrance foyer: "*Sim Sefarim Chaverekha*" – "Make books thy companions. Let thy cases and shelves be thy pleasure grounds and gardens." Towards the novel's end Montag encounters the book underground – exiled book lovers who have committed whole libraries to memory, this one Jonathan Swift, that one Plato's *Republic*, etc. (Montag himself ultimately takes on *Ecclesiastes*), like so many *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* they are the "*baalei mesora*" of a *literature she-ba'al peh*. Isn't that what reading is? Don't our books become part of us?

In education, as in life, we have to emphasize that the simple act of reading is the best exercise to develop that essential characteristic of an engaged religious life: inwardness and reflectivity leading to spiritual maturity. The formula Prof. Faber suggests is that the right kind of reading leads to the interaction of "quality of information" gained through books, the leisure to digest it, and "the right to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two." Thoreau, again, in that same celebration of reading, promised that on a pile of worthy books "we may hope to scale heaven at last."