

Do Geese See God? A Sermon for the Palindrome Year 5775
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Do geese see God?

What?

Don't worry. This isn't a sermon about the spirituality of Waterfowl. Do geese see God is a palindrome. Palindromes are words or phrases that you can read forwards and backwards.

Here is another one, appropriate I think, for the High Holy Days: Did I do, O God, did I as I said I'd do? Good, I did! Palindromes are fun and interesting. We all descend from palindromes – Eve was one, as was Adam when he first met Eve and introduced himself, saying: “Madam, I'm Adam.” We are all children of palindromes Mom and Dad.

Palindromes have something more to teach us. Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo, The 18th century master sage known as the Vilna Ga'on noticed a meaningful palindrome in Torah: Exodus 30, verse 12 reads: *V'natnu ish kofer nafsho* – they shall each give an offering – Rabbi Eliyahu points out that *V'natnu* is a Hebrew palindrome.

Furthermore, the trop markings above the word are palindromic as well – they look like a pair of parentheses. “This should remind us,” he says, “that one who gives today may have to receive tomorrow.”¹ In other words, what goes around comes around. It reminds me of a song I learned at camp as a little kid: “Love is something if you give it away, it comes right back to you.”

There is a reason I'm going on about palindromes. The year we enter tonight – 5775 – is a palindromic year. It won't happen again for another 110 Rosh Hashanas. I think it is saying, as the Torah text always says to us: “*darsheini*” - Interpret me. Palindromes remind me of Newton's third law of motion:

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. *V'natnu* – what we give out, God – or if you prefer - the universe – will somehow respond and give back.

The mystics of the Kabbalah believed that our world and the heavenly realm are palindromic – that is, mirror images of each other, and that what we do down here has an effect on God, which then reflects back down to us. Positive thoughts and actions reflect back positively, negative ones, negatively.

¹ Aderet Eliyahu on Ki Tissa

According to one contemporary student of Kabbalah, “Though we may not be aware of it, when we behave in a contemptuous, uncivil, or rude manner, we arouse negative forces. When we cheat, lie, insult, or harm other people, a negative energy force is brought into existence. Each time we lose our patience, react with anger, or lose our temper — poof! — we have created an actual force of darkness... These negative forces are the unseen cause behind all the things that just “happen” to go wrong in our lives... ”²

I think he is taking this concept quite literally, but you don’t have to. If you are not of a mystical bent, the idea works just as well as a metaphor. The Greek etymology of Palindrome means: “running back again.” It’s like a boomerang: It goes out; it comes back. Our words and actions are like boomerangs that we fling out into the cosmos.

And, like *V’natnu*, they eventually come back to us, whether actually on the ground, or in the effect they have on our souls. In Pirkei Avot, Ben Azzai teaches: *Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah; averah goreret averah*. A mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, a transgression to another transgression.

As you may know, during this year of focus on Torah we will be studying Mussar.

According to the book *Every Day Holy Day*, Mussar is “a Jewish spiritual tradition that offers insight and guidance for living by directing us to pay attention to the impact that our inner traits have on our lives.”³

Mussar is a way to engage with Torah text in order to really live its values. You will be hearing more about it in the coming days and weeks. The short version is that Mussar encourages us to bring Torah into our lives and live up to the best that is in us by cultivating positive *Middot* – character traits – thereby bringing out the best in our world.

Standing at the threshold of this palindromic New Year, we have decisions to make about what we will send out into our world in the 12 months ahead.

The mystics have another teaching that on Rosh Hashanah the doors of wisdom and insight swing open to us, that we may draw on them to direct our choices for the coming year. We need help, because choosing the *right* path often means choosing the *difficult* path. It is hard to choose patience when we are harried, to choose compassion when we are angry, courage when we are afraid, to choose faith in our grief.

² <http://kabbalahstudent.com/kabbalahs-hidden-secret-about-rosh-hashanah/>

³ Morinis, Alvin. *Every Day Holy Day*. Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2010, p.vii

Mussar teacher Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler describes the moment of choosing as a “Bechira point.”⁴ Bechira points are the lines one has to cross in order to choose the good or the right course at any given moment. It takes wisdom, insight, and also courage to step up to the line and resolve to cross over. These lines are different for each person, and for any given person they are constantly moving targets.

There is a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where notoriously naughty Calvin wishes that Santa would consider a kid’s predisposition when making his list. Calvin says, “I mean, if some sickeningly wholesome nerd *likes* being good, it’s easy for him to meet the standards. There’s no challenge! Heck anyone can be good if he wants to be. The true test of one’s mettle is being good when one has an innate inclination towards evil.” He then goes on to slam his friend Suzie with a snowball, and comments to Hobbs, “I wanted to put a rock in it, but I didn’t. That should count for a lot!”⁵ Calvin has some serious *bechira* points to deal with.

Rosh Hashana, as you know, means the New Year. But the word *shannah* comes from the same root as *shinui*, which means change. Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of change.

A woman worked for weeks on a needlework sampler that said “Prayer changes things.” Finally, she proudly hung it over the mantelpiece. A few days later, she noticed it was missing. She asked her husband if he had seen it, and he said, “I took it down. I didn’t like it.” “But why?” she asked. Don’t you believe that prayer changes things?” “Sure I do,” he answered, “But I don’t like change.”

Change is never easy. But we are created in the image of God, and one of the ways we imagine God is as change itself. When Moses asks God’s name at the burning bush God responds, “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. - I will become what I will become.” *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* – a palindrome phrase.

There is another type of palindromic effect, in which reading the text backwards *changes* our understanding of it instead of just mimicking it. It suggests that what we do can turn around, or reverse something we encounter. When someone approaches you in anger, might you respond with equanimity? When someone is in pain, will you respond with comfort? And when you have failed someone, or have regrets, can you reach out and make it right?

⁴Dressler, Rabbi Eliyahu E. *Strive for Truth!*, Jerusalem and NY: Feldheim, 1978, 52-56 as cited in Morinis, Alvin. *Everyday Holiness*. Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007, p.22

⁵ http://www.gocomics.com/calvinandhobbes/1992/12/20#.U_TpNNvbQ_Z

This is Teshuva – turning – and it is what these Holy Days are all about.

From a mystical perspective, it is a spiritual law of the universe that when a person achieves a positive change in his or her own nature, the universe must respond and reflect that positive energy back. The result is Tikkun – repair.

There is a story in the Talmud about a Rabbi Yosef who was gravely ill and for a moment saw a glimpse of heaven. When he revived he told his father, “I saw an *olam hafuch* -an upside down world-. The *elyonim* (the ‘high’ people) were low and the *tachtonim* (the ‘low’ people) were high.” “No – said his father, “You saw an *olam barur* (a clear world)!”

Sometimes here on earth things are topsy turvy, and we need to reverse them with acts of Tikkun. I’ll illustrate – and conclude – with a palindrome poem, written by 20 year old Jonathan Reed. It was the winning entry in a contest sponsored by AARP. This poem, when read in reverse, changes its perspective instead of simply repeating itself. It is an expression of Teshuva, of Tikkun, and of hope.

Lost Generation by Jonathan Reed⁶

I am part of a lost generation
and I refuse to believe that
I can change the world
I realize this may be a shock but
“Happiness comes from within.”
is a lie, and
“Money will make me happy.”
So in 30 years I will tell my children
they are not the most important thing in my life
My employer will know that
I have my priorities straight because
work
is more important than
family
I tell you this

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z92HQkRmhlc>. In this video, you can see how the palindrome effect works. I encourage you to watch it.

Once upon a time
Families stayed together
but this will not be true in my era
This is a quick fix society
Experts tell me
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce
I do not concede that
I will live in a country of my own making
In the future
Environmental destruction will be the norm
No longer can it be said that
My peers and I care about this earth
It will be evident that
My generation is apathetic and lethargic
It is foolish to presume that

There is hope.

And all of this will come true unless we choose to **reverse it** .

There is hope.

It is foolish to presume that

My generation is apathetic and lethargic

It will be evident that

My peers and I care about this earth

No longer can it be said that

Environmental destruction will be the norm

In the future

I will live in a country of my own making

I do not concede that

30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce

Experts tell me

This is a quick fix society

but this will not be true in my era

Families stayed together

Once upon a time

I tell you this

Family

is more important than

work

I have my priorities straight because
My employer will know that
they are not the most important thing in my life
So in 30 years I will tell my children
“Money will make me happy.”
is a lie, and
“Happiness comes from within.”
I realize this may be a shock but
I can change the world
and I refuse to believe that
I am part of a lost generation.

Eternal and Intimate God, grant us the insight and courage we need to choose well what we will send out into the world in the New Year. Help us to choose kindness and compassion, blessing, and peace. And may we receive them back in abundance.

Amen.

And finally, one last palindrome for this palindrome year: *Are we not drawn onwards, we Jews, drawn onward to new era?*