

The Stories Behind Our Face

Rosh Hashanah, September 19, 2009, 1 Tishrei 5770

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There is a blessing for when you see a large crowd. The Talmud teaches us to praise God who is "...the wise [knower of] secrets." At such a moment of seeing a faceless mass of humanity¹, we acknowledge God's ability to know us. We don't want to be simply a statistic, or God forbid ordinary. We are each unique with an inner narrative combining our struggles and successes, our memories and dreams - that which makes us who we are.

Many of us facing a group of people or crowd feel daunted. There is a story about how, ironically, this can work to one's advantage. At many universities it is not uncommon for classes to have two, three or sometimes four hundred people in a lecture hall. I heard that at the University of Minnesota, an incident occurred recently during a final exam in one such class. Time had run out, the professor called for the exams and the students finished up, tossing the blue book exams on the professor's lectern upon leaving the room. A few minutes passed, the last few students desperately scribbled their final comments and left the auditorium, leaving only the professor and the stack of hundreds of blue books at the lectern in the front of the room and one student in the middle of the auditorium. He kept writing. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed and the professor stood there shocked at this student's chutzpah. Finally, the student walked up to the professor, blue book in hand, ready to hand it in. The professor said: "Young man, if you think I am going to accept that exam, now twenty minutes late, you are mistaken." At which point the student replied: "Professor, do you have any idea who I am?!" The professor answered indignantly: "No, I have no idea, and to be quite candid, it matters not a whit to me who you are!" The student went on: "So, you're telling me that you have no idea who I am." The professor said: "No. None, whatsoever!" At which point the student took his blue book, shoved it in the middle of the big pile of identical blue books and said "And now you never will! Have a good day," and walked out of the room.

It is an amusing story. It may even be true. A rare moment when being a nameless face in the crowd is something to celebrate.

Most of the time, we want to be known. We want to be appreciated for who we are. The blessing for seeing a crowd reminds us that, like fingerprints, no two faces are precisely alike; no two people are exactly alike. However, anytime we talk about large numbers of people, there are reasons we need categories such as "the uninsured," the "taxpayers," "the unemployed," or even "the elderly," "the 20/30 year olds," and even "Jews." Groups may be necessary for policy and shorthand, but they are unforgiving when one wants to truly be wise. Wisdom comes from knowing people's stories which are often kept secret. It is these individual stories that give the large categories I mentioned any depth or meaning.

The poet and critic Barbara Hardy observes: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others....Life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way."

Too often, we are strangers to each other's stories. We can be with other people physically, but not in spirit, sharing pleasantries without revealing the stories of who we are. The Coen brothers' new movie [A Serious Man](#) is, in part, their attempt to speak to the

¹ Traditionally this blessing is when one sees over 600,000 Jews at one time.

stories of the people they grew up with in MN beyond the hellos and “Happy New Years” in synagogue.

In Genesis, when Adam was created, it says that he was lonely, *l'vado*. The Reform Movement's director of Family Concerns, Rabbi Richard Address spoke at Mount Zion last April about the power of this single word, *l'vado*. God says it is not good for a person to be *l'vado*, alone, so God created an *ezer k'negdo*. This is often translated as “a helper suitable for him.” In the Hebrew, there is a sense of equality in this expression, the sense of someone who could be truly ‘other’ and literally opposite. An *ezer k'negdo* evokes an image of two people facing each other.

How often are we with many people, but still feel alone? How many interactions can one have during the day and not really be seen? How many conversations can transpire without our saying something real?

During these Days of Awe, our spiritual task is to be able to turn *panim el panim*, face to face, not only with others, but with our better selves, the selves we strive to be.

The word, face, in English allows us to be superficial; it is external like the masks we inevitably wear. The Hebrew word for face, *panim*, comes from the same root that means “interior.” Connecting *panim el panim*, face to face -- the way the Torah describes Moses' relationship with God and, at times, the Israelites singular moment on Sinai -- is the ability to pull back the masks, to reveal our true selves.

Why is God's name abbreviated in the Hebrew with the letter “yud” repeated twice? “Yud Yud.” Because when two yuds are facing each other, God's presence is there. In Yiddish, yud sounds like yid, a Jew. And so the teaching is that when two yids are facing each other God's presence is there.

The power of presence and relationship comes in concrete symbols as well. In the center of the ancient Temple was the Holy of Holies and within it, in the Ark of the Covenant. Made of solid gold, it was rectangular. Atop the boxlike structure were two cherubim facing each other, *panim el panim*. Despite the fact that Judaism commands against idolatry and iconography, how powerful is it that an image of relationship was at the very center of our ancient worship, within the Holy of Holies.

Rav Soleveitchik, a brilliant leader and thinker of the past century, captures an aspect of *Panim el Panim* in his book “Lonely Man of Faith” when he speaks about Adam in Genesis:

“Adam ... must quest for a different kind of community. The companionship which Adam is seeking is not to be found in the depersonalized regimentation of the army, in the automatic coordination of the assembly line, or in the activity of the institutionalized, soulless political community. His quest is for a new kind of fellowship, which one finds in the existential community. There, not only hands are joined, but experiences as well; there, one hears not only the rhythmic sound of the production line, but also the rhythmic beat of hearts starved for existential companionship and all-embracing sympathy and experiencing the grandeur of the faith commitment; there, one lonely soul finds another soul tormented by loneliness and solitude yet unqualifiedly committed.”

To counter anonymity and loneliness, we need ways to be present to each other, *panim el panim*. The way we do so is through telling our stories.

And further--especially for those not bothered by anonymity or who do not feel too lonely—we tell our stories to gain wisdom about our society, our nation, our Jewish world and ultimately about ourselves by understanding issues beyond numbers and categories.

We also tell stories to engage others in the struggle for justice, to understand what keeps us awake at night, to learn what motivates us to make a difference in our world and to bring people together to become a voice of power. When we tell our motivating stories and listen to others well, we truly understand, according to the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, that we each bear ultimate responsibility for the other.

In fact, our memory works in the same way. Four years ago, the Holocaust museum in Israel, Yad Vashem, was completely overhauled – everything about the main exhibit was redone in a brand new building. For years, the exhibits focused on numbers, hate laws, photographs and events. In 2005, the new Yad Vashem sought to bring the visitor into the lives of individuals who perished, rather than the horror, but incomprehensibility, of six million lives lost. You can now trace the stories of individuals throughout the ten exhibit halls.

Through our stories, we are human. Through the recitation and listening of stories, we become a community. Truly this is already a part of the way we strive to be at Mount Zion. Six years ago, five hundred people met in one on one or household conversations to create our vision statement. We have captured oral histories on video from over one hundred Mount Zion senior adults and past leaders. Eleven of these stories became the basis for a play written by a congregant and performed here two years ago.

We have also utilized the skills of community organizing now an integral part of our Reform Movement. Mount Zion has been among the few congregations that have learned how to listen to each other's stories as a way to foster relationships and motivate engagement. We have had hundreds of one-to-one conversations that have focused our social justice efforts over the past few years. Our current focus is on children and health care.

This coming year with the theme of *Panim el Panim: Connecting Face to Face* there will be a concerted effort in all gatherings, from services to meetings, from religious school to adult classes, to have time for sharing our stories, of why we are engaged in Jewish life, of how we got to where we are, of our hopes and fears for ourselves and loved ones.

And when we tell our stories, they can be, as Arthur Koestler taught, one of three kinds: 1] Ha ha stories – to amuse and entertain; 2] Ah ha stories – for discovery of ideas and education, and 3] Ahhh! Stories – where the tales are sublime and connect the teller and listener with a golden thread.

I want to make a High Holy Day Appeal for your stories, your ah ha and ahh! ones and even your ha ha stories. If you are willing, some will be shared with our community on Yom Kippur.

We are requesting your reflections on two different topics. One is about something on everyone's minds, health care reform. Inside your Rosh Hashanah card is a sheet where you can write – or begin to write – a brief story that captures a personal encounter with our American health care system. It can be as a patient or, for some of you, as a physician or nurse or anyone engaged in the health care system.

Please refrain from solving health care reform. Share instead any indicative story that points toward what is needed for health care access or delivery. You may also e-mail

these directly to me. I will be incorporating some of these stories in my Kol Nidre sermon. Others, if you choose, will be posted or published.

The second topic for your stories will be shared during the afternoon service of the day of Yom Kippur. In place of reciting--as we have done for six years--the words of Mount Zion's vision, we will have four congregants share their story about each of the main parts of our vision, Torah, life-long learning, Avodah, worship and spirituality, and Gemilut Chasadim, acts of loving kindness and justice, and Kehillah Kedoshah, being part of a holy community. If a pivotal event happened in your life connected to one of these four, or if something about you relates to one of them, please take some time before this Wednesday and e-mail me your story.

Please be brief; no more than 250 words. The four areas are Torah – about how learning has been central or transformational for you, Avodah – about prayer, spirituality or Shabbat; and Gemilut Chasadim – about acts of loving kindness, our caring community, about tzedek/justice, about our connections to Israel; and finally Kehillah Kedoshah – about how the sense of belonging to community or to a people has been an anchor, a sense of roots, for you.

Collecting your stories for Yom Kippur and beyond is a formal, concerted way to have more of our voices heard in our community.

There are informal and intimate conversations that are just as important. These will happen to the degree you are willing.

One ritual change in our Shabbat services will help foster some of these conversations. For years, the worship committee has discussed the kaddish prayer. Debates on how a community should recite kaddish are centuries old. Since the Shoah, the Reform Movement has had the entire community stand in memory of those for whom there is no one to say kaddish. In other synagogues, only the mourners rise and recite the prayer. At Mount Zion, beginning next Shabbat we will invite all who are saying kaddish to rise as a group before we recite the names of loved ones; then the entire congregation will be invited to stand with the mourners. In this way, we preserve the support of the entire community and enable our community to honor those who have perished with none to say kaddish. As well, because the mourners will be invited to stand as a group first, we will make a distinction between mourner and community that was lost in our current practice. After services, you will be able to engage those who stood in more meaningful conversation, "Who were you remembering?" By having only the mourners stand as a group, then hearing all the names on the *yahrzeit* list, and then all rising together to say Kaddish, we will help more *panim el panim* conversations after services.

And isn't that what this is all about? We are, by our nature, story tellers. It is how we make sense of our losses and create our individual identities. It is how we stand out in a crowd when someone recognizes our face.

A midrash teaches that when a human king stamps coins, the king has to make each one alike. But the King of Kings creates every human face and no two are the same.

May we strive to truly be with one another in 5770, telling our stories, connecting face to face, *panim el panim*, and being present to one another.