



Rosh Hashanah Sermon -- 5778 -- 2019

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A few weeks ago, at about 2:00 in the afternoon, I was falling asleep at my desk and needed a scene change. I got in my car and began the drive to Elle, your clergy team's favorite closeby destination for coffee that meets the standard of actually called labeled, coffee. I arrived, got out of my car, walked inside, took off my shoes & my socks, got a glass of water, and opened the fridge to look for a snack. It was at about that moment, that I actively realized I was... at home. In my kitchen. Barefoot. Holding a cookie.

Before you worry, I'm okay...this phenomenon has been studied extensively and given a name: inattentional blindness, or, the illusion of attention: objects that pass through the focal point of vision, but *do not* enter awareness. I saw all the turns I should have made, the same signs were there, I just didn't notice any of them.

You know this well, like when you swerve at the last second to somehow avoid the street sign pole? Or when you are walking and texting and still miraculously avoid bumping into oncoming pedestrians. (Nods yes everyone in the room....)

Studies show: "perceptual information may be processed in two, distinct, neural pathways – one guiding behavior, and the other leading to awareness. Essentially, people can *appropriately* use information to *guide* behavior, yet without awareness of what's happening," like zig-zagging while looking down, or ending up barefoot at home on random Thursday afternoon.

In one now famous experiment--cell phone talkers and texters were less likely to show awareness of money on a tree, cash, lots of it, just ahead of them. Nonetheless, they managed to avoid walking *into* the money tree.¹

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4005951/>

Studies further proved that we are all quite likely to miss seeing or noticing objects when their size is inconsistent with their surroundings. In other words, normative expectations of our particular environment dramatically affects our ability to notice what's actually there.²

You all know those memes that sometimes get shared around the interwebs, with a picture and a challenge to test how smart you are, or whether or not you are part of the small percentage who can figure out the illusion, or spot the hidden picture? I admit I often take the bait. I recently took one in which I was asked to spot *the toothbrush in the bathroom*. I immediately saw a toothbrush on the front of the sink, clicked on it, and I'm a genius--one of the few. Then the alert popped up informing me I had missed the gigantic (and I think creepy) toothbrush just behind the one I identified. Turns out, most people, including me, just can't see the supersized object in the frame.

Be it a [a unicycling clown](#), or most famously, [a man in a gorilla suit](#), most of us simply won't see them, no matter how prominent, or colorful, or creepy.

If I tell you to look for a toothbrush, you have an expectation of what its size should be, and where it would *likely* be; the brain, subconsciously & intuitively works to limit potential distractions, and diminishes your visual capacity for pretty much anything else.

This isn't so easy to overcome. Chris Chabris and Daniel Simons point out in their book *The Invisible Gorilla*, "that the problem, and our inability to change it, is that we lack enough evidence for our lack of attention--after all, we don't know about most of what we miss." Consequently, they write, all the evidence we have is for our good perception of the world as it actually is.

It's also kind of a brainy double edged sword, this illusion of attention. On the one hand, we should be appreciative that our minds are constantly working to keep us away from potential distractions. That's how we get things done. On the other hand, think about how often our assumptions and expectations don't allow us to see what's right there in front of us.

In 1965, prodigious scholar and prophet Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel published a book, "Who Is Man" which contains a short teaching that has so stuck with me--I've probably used it in at least 3 weddings, 3 funerals, and probably even a minor scolding to my 9-year old.

(Did I just say scolding? Wow. Somewhere my Mom is saying I told you so.)

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/10/06/science/why-we-miss-things-in-front-of-us.html>

Heschel wrote: The world presents itself in two ways to me. The world as a thing I own, the world as a mystery I face. What I own is a trifle, what I face is sublime. I am careful not to waste what I own; I must learn not to miss what I face. X2

So that's the topic of this sermon---the stuff that's right there in front of us, but we too often miss. I've already given you the scientific why. Now I'd like to give you the what--what is it, as religious people, as Jews, that is right in front of us--like the giant toothbrush, but all too often unseen. What, exactly, before me--is sublime, grand, to be awed?

It is a commonly known matter that within the Jewish tradition we have a custom of burying our dead as soon as we can. In Israel that usually means within 24 hours of death, often even the same day. In the United States, while that timeline is often impossible, 2 to 3 days is not uncommon, short of circumstances beyond one's immediate control.

The reason for this practice, to bury quickly, is that *it is* not dignified, nor honorable, nor respectful, for the sacred vessel which held the fullness of the deceased's life to remain above ground, subject to potential harm and degradation from the elements. While that may be hard to imagine in our hyper-sterilized world, in antitquity it was the norm.

I often ask myself, especially with commonly known customs: where in the Torah does it say that? Where amidst the 5 Books, or the Prophets and Writings, do we find the law to bury our dead quickly? Which of the 613 is it?

Let's start with **Deut 21, Ki Teitzei**:

כב וְכִי־יְהִיָּה בְּאִישׁ, חָטָא מִשְׁפָּט־מִוֹת--וְהוֹמַת: וְתָלִיתָ אֹתוֹ, עַל־עֵץ.
כג לֹא־תָלִין גְּבֻלְתוֹ עַל־הָעֵץ, כִּי־קָבוּר תִּקְבְּרֶנּוּ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא--כִּי־קָלַלְתָּ אֱלֹהִים, תָּלוּי; וְלֹא תִטְמָא, אֶת־
אֲדָמְתְךָ, אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, נָתַן לְךָ גְּחֻלָּה. {ס}

If a person is guilty of a capital offense -- not alleged, but charged and sentenced to death, and you hang them on a stake, likely as a deterrent, you must not let their corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury it on the same day. For it is a divine affront to leave it there.

These verses about quick burial, they are about the capital offender. Somebody already convicted of something likely awful, and executed. It's framed in the extreme.

Yet it is from this verse that our Talmudic Rabbis, hundred of years later, extend the ruling to: we must quickly bury *all* of our beloved deceased, not just the executed explicitly mentioned in the verse.³

Take that in -- we offer our loved ones who have passed, their now lifeless bodies, immediate & infinite respect, because the Torah commands us to do so for the convicted & sentenced amongst us.

And, lest we think this counter-intuitive extrapolation is an outlier, idiosyncratic, I'll give you another example. It is also commonly known that a required quorum for certain Jewish prayers, a minyan, is comprised of 10 adult Jews. But that's nowhere in the Torah.

Our Babylonian Talmudic Sages chose this number--and not from the 10 righteous that Abraham might have found in Sodom before it was destroyed, but the 10 spies,⁴ the *Me-raaglim*, who infamously said after scoping out the promised land and experiencing God's prodigious and redemptive power:

לֹא נוֹכַל לָעֲלוֹת אֶל הָעָם כִּי חֲזָק הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ.

We are unable to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.

Spreading doubt, insecurity and despair throughout the Israelite encampment, they continue:

וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגָּבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם:

In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.

Their fate? The death penalty, as it were--they quickly perished after demonstrating this profound lack of faith in God's plan for the Israelites. Yet for the past 2,000 years, any and every intentional gathering of 10 Jews for ritual is an inherent reminder of the faithless spies--the subtle message that any 10 Jews count, even the ones who dismiss God's promise. Even the ones who can't embrace their special destiny. 10 is 10.

3. Mishnah Sanhedrin, 6:5

4. Babylonian Talmud, Megillah, 23b

One more, in case you are still skeptical. Today is called a Yom Teruah. A day of blasts, which we understand to be the shofar. But the Torah doesn't say more than that. Not why, not precisely what, and certainly not how. So our rabbinic tradition captures the word in emotions. Here's the primary interpretation:

יום תרועה יהיה לכם ומתרגמינן יום יבבא יהא לכוּן.

וכתיב באימיה דסיסרא (שופטים ה, כח) בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא מר סבר גנוחי גנח ומר סבר ילולי יליל.⁵

As it is written: "It is a day of sounding [terua] the shofar to you" ([Numbers 29:1](#)), and we translate this verse in Aramaic as: It is a day of yevava to you.

And to define a yevava, because nobody knew what that was, the Talmud quotes from the Book of Judges, a passage written about the mother of Sisera, no friend of ours: ([Judges 5:28](#)). Sisera's mother peers intently out of the window waiting for her son's return from battle. She quickly begins to lose hope. She fears the worst. Reality begins to set in. **Sisera's mother begins to weep.** Her son has been killed. (Book of Judges 5:28-30)

Sisera was a biblical-era commander of the Canaanites, a sworn enemy of the Israelites, and eventually killed by Yael, somewhat brutally. We didn't weep over Sisera's death. His demise was our survival. But his mother did weep. She *did* mourn.

And so we lift her up alongside all grieving parents, and also appoint *her* one of the paradigmatic textual examples of what the wailing cry of the shofar ought sound like.

This should really stop us. Could you imagine an American ritual built upon, or attached to, Osama Bin Ladin's Mom?

Some of Judaism's most ubiquitous and meaningful practices are directly connected, textually, to those in societies we most often consider distractions, out of sight, away from the center, or dangerous. The ones we avoid. The faithless, the convicted, the enemy.

Why is that? What do we stand to gain, as committed adherents to this tradition, from this kind of textual maneuvering and manipulation? Why not construct religious ideals and rituals around the most faithful, the most observant, the most traditional, or the most committed among us?

The Talmud, in its commentary on the burial verses, I think names the answer to this question.

5. Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashnah, 33b

זְלוּלוּ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ הוּא, שְׂאֵדָם עָשׂוּי בְדַמּוֹת דְּיוֹקְנֵנוּ... מִשָּׁל לְשָׁנֵי אַחִים תְּאוּמִים שֶׁהָיוּ דוּמִים זֶה לְזֶה, אֶחָד נִעְשָׂה מֶלֶךְ וְאֶחָד נִתְפָּס לְלִסְטִיּוֹת וְנִתְלָה, כָּל הָרוֹאֶה אוֹתוֹ אוֹמֵר הַמֶּלֶךְ תָּלוּי. הַמֶּלֶךְ תָּלוּי.

To leave the executed above ground & overnight is a degradation of the Divine Majesty, for humans are made in God's image. It may be compared to the case of two twin siblings who very closely resembled each other: one became king and the other was arrested for robbery, then executed and displayed. Whoever saw him on the gallows thought that the king was hanged. That's the King, they said. That's the King.⁶

Twins. Almost identical. Each, different life paths. To the passerby, both divine.

The inherent message of this parable is crystal clear: every single vessel that holds a human, no matter what--convicted or commended, is not "just" created in God's image, *b'tzelem elohim*, but is God's image, itself.

Each of us separated at our own birth from the half that remains fully divine. A single fertilized egg, split into two, billions and billions of times.

It's as if the rabbinic tradition we've inherited was aware of illusions of attention, of the ways in which we intuitively blur away the margins.

And so we don't create ritual based on only the king--that would be an affront to God. An affront to all of God's other twins. We don't establish sacred ritual, like a minyan, a quorum, or the shofar, on **one kind of us** to the exclusion of the rest of us. We're all twins.

Humor me. Imagine yourself right now looking into a mirror. Actually, do it. Close your eyes if you need to. Most of us probably did this a few hours ago, so activate that short term memory. And if you can't literally see in the way I'm describing, know, that I see you. Try to look as far inward as you can, to your heart's center. Touch your heart, if possible.

What do you see? What do you feel? I'll tell you--God's image. God's twin. Focus in again on your mirror image--look closely. See the distractions your reflexive intuition highlight? The stuff you instinctively want to touch up.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 46b

That's expected--because when we look into mirrors we are usually looking for something specific, and that thing, whatever it is, helps our neural pathways render the grandest image in the frame, you--God's twin, as a distraction. But it isn't. you aren't.

Look again. Can you smile at that? Smile at your smile. It's quite something to look at a room of people smiling at their own sanctity.

It doesn't mean there aren't things we want to change. It doesn't mean each of us was born into the body we would have wanted, or in the body with which we'd feel most comfortable. It doesn't mean we can't also mourn the ways in which our bodies don't function. That's all real.

But that's not what being God's twin means. Being God's twin means *that the world* ought to look **at** you, not past you, and recognize you as the Queen's twin sister--no matter the vessel.

Being God's twin means that *even if you do* adapt to your heart's best understanding of your true self, you **still** represent God's image. Because it is as dynamic as you are. Always.

James Baldwin once said, 'It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I'd been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.'

I recently shared a story at a large Friday night Return Again style service that I said then, would be the entirety of my RH sermon. It's not, but you are about to see why it could have been. The headline:

"Missing" Woman Mystery Solved

A group of tourists spend hours Saturday night looking for a missing woman near Iceland's Eldgja canyon.

The group was travelling through Iceland on a tour bus and stopped near a volcanic canyon. Soon, there was word of a missing passenger. The woman, who had changed clothes, didn't recognize the description of herself, and joined the search.

But the search was called off at about 3 a.m., when it became clear the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself.

I am a mystery I face, a mystery I must learn to not miss.

One caveat. Do you know the story of the two Jims?

Twins Jim Springer and Jim Lewis, twins separated at birth. Turns out... growing up apart & not knowing one another, they'd both had dogs named Toy. As young men, they'd both married women named Linda, and then divorced them. Their second wives were both named Betty. They named their sons James Alan and James Allan. They both admitted to leaving love notes around the house for their wives.⁷ And... they both drank Miller Lite beer. Now that can't be a coincidence. That's divine intervention.

Eery, right? But it's not the *midrashic* message here. To be God's twin is not to be two Jims, like this. God, God's self, does not become a human, eat what we eat, watch what we watch, write how we write, create like we create. God does not walk the earth. God's actual self and God's image on must be distinct.

To be God's twin is to be a living, breathing, loving, exquisite, snapshot of God's essence.

I admit, until I came across the teaching about the King and his twin outlaw brother, I had always struggled with how to conceptualize *b'tzelem elohim*, the idea that we are created in God's image. It almost felt trite and cliched, and I never wanted to ascribe an image to God. It is, after all, easier to define what God isn't rather than what God is.- But not anymore. I may not fully understand God, how could I--I may not fully know God, why should I? But as for God's image--it so happens there are about 7.5 billion of them in this world.

If you look to the right, what do you see... God's image. The left... God's image.

See--it's also bipartisan.

We all share a divine DNA that ought fully expand what it is we see, and how we closely we pay attention, such that the only logical next-step is to change the way we communicate, coordinate, congregate, and, yes, legislate.

7. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2012/01/identical-twins-science-dna-portraits/>

I often worry that over the past few generations, as religious fundamentalism and capricious dogma pervade and divide, we rational & center facing Jews have so avoided giving shape and form to God, so intellectualized it, that we've also also diminished our capacity to identify it--to welcome it into our prayer space, our communal space, our national space, our and our global community.

And, I really do believe, the consequences of this a-theological religiosity are real and severe.

Because excising God's image from ourselves and each other, facilitates unnecessary wars, ill-advised and ineffective walls, chronic & widespread homelessness, brazen corruption, neglect of our elderly, reckless pollution, children brutally taken from their parents and grandparents, or hate-filled violence in places of prayer.

When we fail to see the other as a divine twin, it becomes too easy to over-generalize and under-empathize--the targets most often chosen for the color of their skin, the religious garb they wear, the clothes they choose, the views they hold. It's too much.

"The poor are used to being watched, but not being seen." Father Gregory Boyle of Homeboy Industries recently quipped. It's so true.

But it happens in here too. We notice differences, in looks, practice, commitment, style, and unconsciously define and divide, divide and define. We all do it. The brain has been wired & trained in this way.

But I'd also like to describe for you what can occur *when we do* cultivate our collective intuitions to notice the biggest, most important objects, in our sight lines.

It looks like a small group from Adas Israel visiting our Southwestern Border, crossing into Mexico, standing witness to the tent cities formed as Asylum seekers from South and Central America await entry for the promise of a new life. But then, while serving dinner to tired and weary, a certain Senior Rabbi whose last name rhymes with Koltzblatt, sees a young couple and their two year child who had been shot across the neck in Nicaragua. She quickly befriends them--in a real & deep way, (and since you know her, you know it happened) and then instinctively offers to help sponsor them, find them a home here in D.C. with Adas community members, and when given the chance: they all follow through, without barely a hesitation.

Did I mention that attention comes from the latin *ad + tendere*, "to stretch toward." And the Hebrew word for intention--*kavanah*--comes from *kivein*--to direct, or aim, or calibrate.

Because when you go into a situation that has been endlessly described with numbers & statistics & costs, with words that dehumanize and criminalize, but can still attend & intend yourself to see God's image, you can't help but want to bring that image with you wherever you go--to provide it the opportunities you were provided. To give that image real, lasting hope.

Sure, it's easier to ignore. Yes, it could be else's responsibility. But to bend attention to the margins, to see them for the size they are, like our tradition did with the executed corpse, the faithless spies & and even the mama's of our sworn enemies, to create holy rituals by placing them at the center--that's just Judaism.

Today, if you happen to walk through the Adas pre-school, our Gan, you would see God's 3-year old Nicaraguan twin, playing safely alongside his counterparts every day--loved by his teachers, cared for by this community.

And if you walked a few classes down, you'd also see God's twin image--but this time in the shape a 4-year old muslim child, a refugee from Syria, who you all encouraged and supported this synagogue to bring to this country and embrace into our community. Thank you for that. *Thank you for helping us to not to miss what we face.*

For a religious institution, seeing God's twin means not building a synagogue to avoid what, or whom, we may prefer to miss, but to confront them, to comfort them. Over the summer our homelessness and housing team joined our Hesed Committee, and began actively reaching out to the homeless in Cleveland Park and Friendship Heights, our backyard, to invite them for a delicious and home-cooked dinner once a month. Right back there in the Wasserman.

God's twins, ragged, worn, tired--offered a slice of the dignity they deserve. We truly pray on holy, hallowed ground today. Precious feet have softened here, thanks to you.

"Some kind of attention will always be present," Stanford professor and author Jenny O'dell writes, "but when we take hold of it, we have the ability to consciously direct, expand, and contract it. You notice something once, and then begin noticing it everywhere. When the patterns of our attention have changed, we render our reality differently. We begin to move and act in a different kind of world."

And this, ultimately, is my goal in delivering this sermon on this day. It's what I want for us. To retrain our intuitions to fully center what we previously erased as distractions; to widen the frame, intentionally, and begin to notice God's twin-image everywhere. To see the world the way our Sages did, and then upend the expected for the deeply embedded sanctity we might otherwise forget.

The world presents itself in two ways--as a thing we own, and as a mystery we face. **We are careful not to waste what we own; we must learn not to miss what we face.**

Sublime, grand, gifted, gorgeous, glorious--God. Shana Tova.