

*Shanah tovah.*



Let's begin with a **family picture**: That's ME – Judging from the bowl haircuts, I'm going to place this picture **circa 1986**, thirty-two years ago. (*Man, looking at this picture is like an episode of The Goldbergs ... or maybe it's like the scene at the end of Back to the Future when Michael J. Fox is playing [sing] "Earth Angel" on guitar and hoping he and his siblings still exist in the future... Also, this is the last picture on record where my father has more hair than my sister...*) But even if I **cannot** place the **exact year**, I can tell you for *sure* the **day on the Jewish calendar** when that this picture was taken: It's the **first day of Rosh Hashanah**, when every year my Zeide (of blessed memory) would try to arrange us into the **perfect picture** on the front lawn of my Bubbie and Zeide's home on Englewood Street in Northeast Philly. He would **mix up our names**, trying to get our **attention**: "Eri-Ada-Jonathan – look here... Ada-Joshua – stand still..." (*You can see how successful my Zeide was with us all if you look closely: My seven-year-old brother has a devilish look on his face. He's thinking, 'I'm gonna mess with this pic at the last minute' – and there he is, he crosses his legs – and I'm sure my Zeide didn't realize it until the pictures were **developed** (!) and distributed to the branches of the family.*)

But of *all* the family pictures we have, on all those Rosh Hashanah days on the front lawn, and all the other family times, here's **something sad**: We actually have **very few pictures of my Zeide**. I know where he is in this picture [*Stand in FRONT facing the pic*]. He's right here; he is *taking* the picture. [*Zeide pic*] That's him, Lee Linder. **Not a lot of pictures** of him, though. It's **sad** – and it's a problem that will **no longer exist** – for one reason, **one technological innovation** that, I believe, has changed the way we chronicle our world: [*SELFIE POSE*]



**selfie** *n.*  
**/ 'selfi /**

Welcome to the age of the **selfie**. Five years ago (too late for my Zeide), "selfie" was the **Oxford Dictionary "Word of the Year"** – and since then, we have never looked back. **Never looked back** – no, we've looked **right into** the front-facing camera on our smartphones, holding our chin at just the right angle to look as normal as is possible to look when we're [*demonstrate*] only arm's length away from the lens.

This is the way we document our world – and one glance at social media will tell you that, **if there's no selfie** of an important moment or place, **it didn't happen**, it doesn't exist. I first got the idea for this sermon last December when I was in Israel with some of our teens. The moment we got off the bus, *before* any explanation of the significance of a site, we **allotted selfie time**. Off the bus, on the bus, in the Negev Desert, at the Kotel, at Mount Herzl and a party in Tel Aviv or on the Sea of Galilee – [*SELFIE POSE*].

It was **so pervasive** that, on the last night of the trip, when the **staff** was asked to do a quick **skit** to **spoof** the teens on the trip, we presented it as a **Public Service Announcement** – pretending to be the teens, at different sites, taking their group selfies, and then had the voiceover: "*Bruchim ha-Ba'im l'Eretz Yisrael – Welcome to Israel – it's what's behind you in your selfies.*"

Now, please understand: I am **NOT criticizing** this tendency. It was **cute** – and there is something **profoundly impactful** about the fact that the **teens' lasting images** of Israel are *not* empty landscapes, but rather **they have placed themselves, IN ISRAEL**. When they look at their pictures, they will **see themselves as part of the story** of our People, **in** our People's homeland. That is *so* important.

I'm *not* **criticizing** – but I **AM observing** – that this type of picture-taking **profoundly impacts our perspective**, how we see our world. And today on Rosh Hashanah, when we are asked to **look inward** – [*CAMERA-INVERT ICON SIGN*] – to **flip our camera lens** to make it face *ourselves*, to **look**



critically at ourselves, to **turn the camera on ourselves**.... Today, when we are asked to take our **most self-reflective, even self-critical** selfie of the year, I wonder: As the song goes: If we are **[SING]** “Selfie Boys and Girls,” in a “Selfie World,” **WHERE are we?** Where do we position ourselves?

In our **vision**, in our **picture** of our world, **where are we?** Are we in the **foreground**, or the **background**? Are we in the picture, in the action.... Are we “**Waving through a Window**,” unnoticed? Are we **behind the camera lens**, appreciating, documenting, but unseen? What is in our focus? For **my Zeide**, *though* he is not here to answer that question, I’d like to think that in **his focus**, as he desperately tried to herd us into the Rosh Hashanah picture – that his **family** was the only thing in his focus. Where does our eye go? What catches our attention? A



world where, with the **same phone**, we can take **[Mock-ups of both types of pics in the sanctuary]** wide-angle panoramas AND **[FLIP]** close-up, self-focused selfies – such a world **DEMANDS** that we ask this **question**: Where are we positioned in the way we view our world?

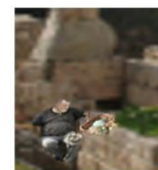


The **poet-laureate of Israel, Yehuda Amichai**, wrote a poem that captures this dilemma, and I thought of Amichai’s poem as I watched the teens put themselves into Israel with their selfies. The poem is called “**Tourists**,” and Amichai begins a bit cynically, describing the tourists, we who come to Israel and model the proper emotions at each site, drool over good-looking soldiers, take their pictures. It stings a little – in part, because it’s so true – but then Amichai abruptly **switches to prose** for the conclusion of the poem. He writes **[AMICHAH POSTER]**:

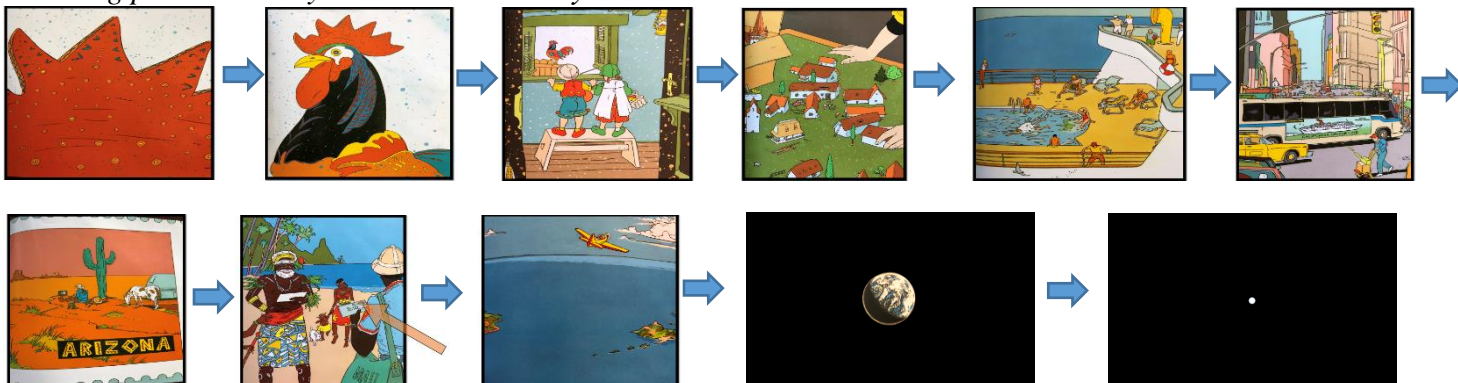
Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I placed my **two heavy baskets** at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their **target marker**. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "**But he's moving**, he's moving!" I said to myself: **redemption** will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's **not important**: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."



It’s such a **tough challenge**: What is most important? **[“ZOOM” swipe with fingers]** Amichai asks us to see the **person** in the picture. That is what a selfie does. But it’s also a **balance** – because there is a **danger** that, if we’re *so much* in the **foreground**, we **don’t notice** the **beauty**, the **big picture**, everything around us, everyone *else* around us. If we **zoom in too much**, we begin to see **ourselves** as the focus, we miss the other people, and **the rest of God’s creation**, that is all around us. We lose track of the fact that we are a **small part of something even more beautiful and miraculous**. We need to **zoom out** – *far beyond* **[SHOW]** arm’s length, *far beyond* any telescoping selfie-stick could reach – to **see how critical** we are, *and how small* we are in God’s creation. That’s the point of the spiritual exercise we did a few years ago, when I gave you all **two slips of paper**, one that said, **Bishvili nivra ha-olam**, the entire world was created for my sake... and the other which said **Va-anochi afar va-efer** – I am but dust and ashes. There is a teaching that we should walk around with each of these slips of paper in one of our pockets – reminding us that we are always **balancing** between these **two extremes** – between “**I am in the foreground, I am the focus**” and “**I’m just a small speck of this whole beautiful panorama**.” (*For those of you who wish to try out this spiritual practice again, there are more of the slips on the flyer tables outside the Sanctuary doors.*)



That’s the **balance** we need to strike: Between the two parts of the teaching by the sage **Hillel** (*you know, the guy named for the matzah sandwich*), “**Im ein ani li, mi li, u-ch’she-ani l’atzmi mah ani**” – If I do *not* focus on myself, who am I? And if I **only zoom in** on myself, what worth have I?”



We live in a **world** that **prizes individualism** so dearly – isn't that a **challenge**? Tomorrow, in our learning, we're going to see how such **self-focus**, in its **extreme**, is ultimately **idolatry**, Judaism's primary sin! If we are *that* **individualistic**, to **zoom in** on **ourselves** – **how important** are we, really? How **EXCLUSIVELY** and **SINGULARLY** **important** are we? That's a reason that when we wear *tefillin*, we place one of the **leather boxes** **right here** **[SHOW]** – one of the **few places** we **cannot see** on our own bodies – to reinforce that we do Judaism in *community*. If we want to envision ourselves, **don't use a selfie stick; get a friend** to help, to see us, in the ways, in the places **[SHOW]** that **require another person**, a fellow human being, to truly see us.

And yet, when we **dare suggest** that we are *not in the center*, but rather off to the side or in the background, **people get upset** – *really* upset. *Not* just nowadays, in our **modern individualistic society** – it got **Galileo** in trouble, five hundred years ago. Galileo was **excommunicated** because he suggested that the **earth was not the center** of the solar system, but rather it was the sun in the center. **How dare he** suggest that **WE were not the center** of it all? And yet, **maybe the “selfie” perspective** of the universe is **not all wrong**: In modern times, some astrophysicists have postulated that since the **universe is expanding** in infinite directions at multiple accelerations **[SHOW]**, there really isn’t *one* center at all, so we just have to **choose a focal-point**, from which to determine our perspective of the universe. **Why not choose ourselves** as the focal point? (*Take that, Galileo...*)

We *all* choose our perspectives; we choose the **vantage point** from where we see the world, and we choose **where we place ourselves** in our world-view. [SHOW ON MAP] Think about it: The term “Middle East” or “Mideast” describes Israel and her neighbors – but that term *assumes* that the region is being **viewed FROM Europe and the Americas, from the West**. From our perspective, Israel and her neighbors are the Mideast, and China and her neighbors are the Far East. But that is completely arbitrary and specific to our vantage point. Can you imagine a bunch of political pundits in Shanghai sitting around and





We choose our perspectives. **WE focus our pictures, WE envision ourselves, our place, in our world.** [FLAT SHMULEY PICS] This summer, I sent you all a **paper-doll cut-out**, based on the *Flat Stanley* children's books – but we called ours “Flat Shmuley” or “Flat Shuli.” (*We're egalitarian here.*) I asked you to **position** Shmuley or Shuli in **your world**, as you traveled, as you enjoyed summer. I expected the kids to do it – but I did not anticipate the **hundreds of photos** from so many of you – **some selfies** of you with Shmuley, **some zooming in** on Shuli, some a **wide-angle family picture** where I had to search for her... The **plain paper** cut-out, or personalized (I liked our head custodian Shawn, who made “Flat Shawnie” – and our Asnis **Gift-Shop ladies** who cut out a picture of comedienne Amy Schumer's head and traveled around with “Flat Schumey.”



The pics are in a **mosaic collage** the lobby – and **keep them coming**, between now and Yom Kippur – email [flatshmuley@adathisrael.org](mailto:flatshmuley@adathisrael.org), and bring your paper-dolls or pictures in and clip them up in the lobbies.... But what was most fascinating to me was **how you positioned your flat friend**. In the front, or part of the scene – our **perspectives are as varied** as we are.

Can we **seek that balance**, for **where we position** ourselves? This question is nothing new: In Judaism it dates back to the earliest formulations of the **Hebrew language** of the Bible. (*Here's where your Rabbi really shows how much a nerd I am...*) Hebrew has a verb construct known as the *hitpa'el* – the **reflexive** construct – that takes almost any verb and turns it on ourselves. So for example, if I get my son dressed, the verb is *lil'vosh*, or *lavash* – but to **dress myself is l'hitlabesh**. That's the reflexive voice in Hebrew.



[CAMERA REVERSE ICON, with mirror reflective surface on opposite side] The **Hebrew language** has had a **selfie function** for thousands of years. This time of year, the High Holidays – this is the time of year when we **DO turn the camera focus on ourselves**, on our souls. In fact, the **Hebrew verb for “praying”** is in this **reflexive**, selfie voice – *l'hitpallel*. It means to **evaluate ourselves**, to **scrutinize ourselves**. The prayer we engage on these High Holidays is *not* about the words we say OUT, this way [outward] – but the way it **helps us see ourselves**, this way [inward].

At this time of year, let's turn that **reflexive, selfie camera** on us – **focus on ourselves**, look at ourselves, reflect on our lives. And let's **also zoom out**, to **see ourselves in the big picture** [WIDE-ANGLE PIC], a small but critical, beautiful, holy part of it all. May God give us the strength to help us find **our place, our pose**, in the most beautiful, diverse, miraculous, sacred picture of our world this year. **Keyn yehi ratzon** – So may it be God's will – and let us say: **AMEN**.



Now: lean in and pose! [Pretend to click a group selfie – and hold up the group pic with me in the front, a la *Ellen at Oscars*]

