

You Are My Witnesses

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Being that it's Yom Kippur and all, the Day of Atonement when we lay ourselves bare and do a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, a personal accounting of the soul — I think I need to come clean about something: *I am not really an expert when it comes to movies*. The truth is, to quote Peter Sellers from his film *Being There*, "I like to watch."

Some of you may remember "Dream On", an early 90s nostalgia show on HBO which would open with a baby being plopped down in front of a TV, and over the next 60 seconds you would watch that baby grow up in front of twenty years of television. Well, that was me. Pretty much everything I knew, everything which formed my worldview and value system came from The Lone Ranger, I Love Lucy, The Andy Griffith Show, and Bonanza.

I've come to the conclusion that I probably have undiagnosed ADD. While I love books, I've always had difficulty reading for extended periods of time. I'd read something, my mind would wander, and the next thing I knew I'd have to go back and re-read a page or two while I drifted somewhere else. But television and movies were different. They were much more natural for me. Simply put, I liked to watch. I still do.

Early on in my rabbinate here I gave a sermon on a movie. I'm not sure which one was first. It might have been Babe. Or Forrest Gump. Or Remains of the Day. I distinctly remember using those films as foundations for High Holy Day sermons. And it didn't take long for the questions to predictably come, "Rabbi, which movie are you going to preach about this year?" More than just a tradition, a reputation had been born.

But as so many of you know, it was (and remains) more than just referring to a current film as a way to get into what I would feel is a deeper, spiritual subject. For as long as I can remember I've been using film scenes and dialogue as a kind of *midrash*. Because I actually think they are.

Midrash is commentary. For the ancient rabbis, they would creatively expand upon the Torah's text, or imagine what Torah might have left out. But at its core, the goal of *midrash* is to find the deeper truths of human existence. Great literature does the same thing. As does film. (Well, the good movies anyway.) It's all story-telling. It's all a reflection of the human condition, of our insatiable desire to find meaning.

The truth be told, and I'm making this confession publicly here tonight, I have no expertise when it comes to film. I just like a good story. And for 38 years you have afforded me this hallowed spot in your synagogue to share with you my thoughts, so many of them being inspired or enriched by a movie I might have seen a few days or weeks before. Occasionally I might even bring in a text from Torah. It has been, for me, a treasured gift. And for this I will be eternally grateful.

This morning, therefore, will be no different.

I want to share with you a line a dialogue from a film entitled "Shall We Dance". This is not to be confused with the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie of 1937. Rather it comes from the American remake of the original Japanese film of the same title, about a man (played by

Richard Gere) who tries to learn ballroom dancing as a way to restore joy to a life that feels to him as having become routine. But he's embarrassed by this flirtation, so he keeps it a secret. His wife (Susan Sarandon), as a result, thinks he's having an affair and hires a private detective (played wonderfully, I might add, by Richard Jenkins) to follow him.

The scene I want to share occurs during a conversation between the man's wife and the private detective. Reflecting on the challenges of marriage, she rhetorically asks, "Why is it, do you think, that people get married?" He replies, "Passion". But she shakes her head, so he shoots back at her and asks, "Why, then?" And here's what she says:

"We need a witness to our lives. There's a billion people on the planet...I mean, what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage, you're promising to care about everything. The good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things...all of it, all of the time, every day. You're saying 'Your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go un-witnessed because I will be your witness'."

I'd love to tell you that the wisdom is mine. I love to take credit for the insight. By the same token, I know a good movie quote when I hear it.

We need witnesses to our lives. Our lives depend on others to say, "Your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go un-witnessed...I will be your witness." Perhaps this is the essence of all relationship. At the core of my connection to my life-partner, to my parent, to my child, to my dearest friend — at the core of my connection is simply to be a witness to you and your uniqueness. It's easy to say "I love you." To provide for your needs, to care for you does not really require much of me. But to understand that my "job" in our relationship is to affirm you, to let you know that I know — this is a different story.

And it is a profoundly Jewish value.

Witnessing assumes a central role in Judaism, from testifying before a *Beit Din* in Jewish legal matters to signing a wedding *Ketubah*. The role of the *ayd* / אד or witness is to say "I confirm that this *is*." Indeed, should we take the word *ayd* / אד and reverse the letters it spells *dah* / דה which means "know" (as in "knowledge"). Even more, the word *dah* / דה is in the imperative verb state. It's a "command", a *mitzvah*. We are commanded to be cognizant. To be aware. To pay attention. In a relationship your role — as a witness — is to pay attention. To observe (and not just react). To see (and not just watch). To listen (and not just hear). This is what it means to be attentive. And this is how we witness each other's life.

None of this is easy stuff. It's challenging to not be a by-stander. It takes work. Effort. A willingness to transcend your own personal needs. More than just acknowledging something to be true or false, to be a witness means to become a participant. To be a witness means to willingly and often courageously insert yourself into the matrix. The witness affirms, "I am willing to be part of this. I am willing to be part of you."

Perhaps that is why the *Shema* — which means to listen, to be attentive — is the central articulation of what it means to be a Jew.

It is not by accident, it is not a serendipitous act of calligraphic creativity that the *Shema* — the 6-word articulation of Jewish faith — is written in the Torah scroll with two dramatically enlarged letters: the last letter of the first word and the last letter of the last word. The *ayin* / ע from the word *shema* / שמע and the *dalet* / ד from the word *echad* / אחד. Together the *ayin* / ע and the *dalet* / ד spell *ayd* / אד and that means "witness". To remind us that this is our *raison*

d'être, this is the reason we exist as a people — to not merely say but to live the *Shema*. Because God needs a witness.

How many times I have taught that our role as a people is to serve witness. This is not to be confused with Evangelicals witnessing as part of their mission as they spread the “good news”. For Jews, being a witness is not about getting others to do or think something. For us being a witness is about how we look at ourselves in relation toward others. We serve witness to God by doing *mitzvot*. Everything we are, everything we do as Jews revolves around this guiding principle.

This is the context within which we need to appreciate what it is we did last night. We stood before the Torah scrolls to acknowledge our role as witnesses — albeit in that moment it was actually the Torah scrolls which were held before us to serve as *our* witnesses. *Kol Nidre* is a dramatization of a legal ceremony. The three scrolls represent the *Beit Din*, the tribunal of judgment. And we placed ourselves before them as an acknowledgment of our responsibilities — as Jews — to do what we are supposed to do. It's not simply about whether we were good or bad. It's not just about the promises we made but didn't fulfill. Or the promises we make but might not live up to. *Kol Nidre* is a ritual — it is *the* ritual — where the Jewish people rise as one to say, “This is who I am. This is who I am supposed to be. This is who I wish I had been. This is who I hope to be — ‘*As God is my witness.*’”

Remember, in a relationship the witnessing goes both ways.

And so it is with you and me.

I have frequently been asked what has been the best part of being a rabbi? What has given me the greatest rewards?

Teaching Torah has been a source of absolute joy. This was why I was ordained. To be a teacher of Torah. To be the guarantor of the Jewish tradition. To bring Torah to the center of your lives and the life of this community. Shabbat morning discussions. Learning *from* as well as *with* your daughters and sons. Taking them to Amsterdam, affording them the opportunity to learn about the tragedy and the beauty of the Jewish spirit, bringing them to the imagination of M. C. Escher, the brushstrokes of Van Gogh, and the stunning flavors of Indonesian food.

The source of perhaps my greatest sense of accomplishment has been to have played a role in the founding and emergence of Temple Ner Tamid. To partner with the visionaries of Temples Menorah and B'nai Zion, with the courageous and devoted leaders of Beth Shalom and to slowly but surely nurture a community that continues to emerge and become.

Mine has been a profoundly rich and rewarding rabbinate. But without question, the best part, the part that could never have happened anywhere else — was to have known you. The best part of being your rabbi has been witnessing your lives. From sharing your daughter's bat mitzvah to bringing you to the *mikveh*. From standing with you beneath the *huppah* to holding your children in my arms as we gave them their names to accompanying you to the grave. Listening to your pain and sharing in your joy. Being your rabbi has allowed me to be part of you. And, as such, you have become a part of me.

I cannot begin to list the members of this community who have touched my life. There are so many who are gone now, but please believe me when I tell you they are not forgotten. They are standing up here on the bimah with me right now. And not a day goes by that one or more of you float into my consciousness. Some of you will stay there for a while. No matter whether

our relationships are close or casual; each of you has found your way into whom I have become.

Years ago, when I was still a rabbinic student at the Hebrew Union College, my Aunt Dorothy was stricken with cancer. When I went to visit her in the hospital, I remember — after my aunt started bragging about how I was going to be a rabbi — her non-Jewish roommate commented on how wonderful it must be to have received “The Call”. Not really believing any of that stuff, I sarcastically replied, “In my case, the ‘call’ was collect.”

I never really bought into the idea that I was on some “mission from God.” Being a rabbi was a career choice. I had a sense of purpose, but I have always resisted the notion that God wanted me to be a rabbi. Yet, as I look back on my years here, I wonder. Perhaps I was supposed to be *here*, that each of you were supposed to be in my life? And I in yours? Perhaps my purpose was more than simply being your rabbi? Perhaps I came here in 1980 to witness your lives?

For all the times I have stood on the *bimah* and called your sons and daughters to Torah and said, “It is a privilege and a joy...” I’m here tonight to tell you that might have started out as a “line” but it has become one of the most sacred truths of my life.

I am also here today to tell you that you have been my witness.

Some of you have been with me from the very beginning (or very near it). For a Biblical generation of 40 years, you have celebrated in my joys as well as sustained me through very challenging days. You have seen me at my best and when I was wanting. Simply put, so much of who I am now rests with you. You are family.

I appreciate that such a sentiment might sound trite. It’s so common and easy to say. But you *are* my family. My biological and adoptive families are small. The times we all get together are few and far between. Yet every Shabbat you are there. Every September your eyes and smiles and embracing arms help me welcome another new year of my life. You sat shiva with me. You danced at my children’s b’nai mitzvah celebrations. When my marriage ended, you were there to offer support and love. You sang “Happy Birthday” to me and even bought me a cake. Multiple times.

We’ve had our moments. But then again, show me a family that hasn’t. But you’ve also breathed life into me, you’ve nourished my soul, and helped me open my heart. While I have failed you on more than a few occasions, you have shown me a forgiveness and compassion of which I never could have dreamed. (I thought about quoting Lou Gehrig here, but I’m a Tigers fan. Always will be.)

We have been bound in sacred relationship acknowledging and affirming that our lives matter.

Is this not the purpose of a synagogue? We are not here to Bar and Bat Mitzvah our kids. We are not here to put on Purimspiels and sing in the choir. We are not here to listen to speakers and watch movies and feed the hungry. We are here for each other. That’s all. The rest is commentary. We are here to say *Hineni*. To each other. I am here for you. I am here to acknowledge you. I am here to acknowledge your truth. I am your witness.

We say *Hineni* when we attend the House of Mourning, even if we do not know the family. We say *Hineni* when we go to a Shabbat morning service when there is a Bar Mitzvah, even if we were not invited. We say *Hineni* when we go up to someone at an Oneg Shabbat who is standing off to the side by herself. We say *Hineni* when we email the President to let him know there’s space at our Seder table. We say *Hineni* when we come here on the High Holy Days

and thank an usher for volunteering of their time. We say *Hineni* when we stop ourselves from complaining and instead ask how can I be of help.

Over the centuries synagogues have been called by various names. *Beit Midrash*, a house of study. *Beit Tefillah*, a house of prayer. These would be accurate. We study here. We pray here. Both of those things form much if not most of the programmatic agenda of a synagogue. But the name that has stuck, the one which best reflects the essence of not so much what we do but who we are, is *Beit Knesset*. House of Assembly. In Greek, *Synagoga*. Synagogue. More than just a community center, *Beit Knesset* (בית כנסת) implies an opening up. It is the same word as כניסה / *K'nisa*, an entrance. This is the place where we open ourselves up. This is the place where we let each other in.

Witness — *ayd* / עד — is spelled with an *ayin* / ע and a *dalet* / ד. Did you know that many of the Hebrew letters are actually pictographs? Their names are reflective of shapes which carry intrinsic meaning.

The *ayin* / ע is an “eye”.

The *dalet* / ד is a “door”.

ayin / ע: To be a witness means to be attentive. We must not merely look at others but see them. Affirm them. Let them know they matter.

dalet / ד: To be a witness is to be a portal whose doors are always open. To have open arms and an open heart.

Thank you for opening yourselves to me and letting me in. Thank you for seeing me and helping me be who I am supposed to be. Thank you.

And you know how you can thank me? Do the same with each other. And for each other. Make this place your home. See each other as family. Understand that yours is to be a witness. Embrace the notion of *Hineni*. “I am here.”

This is my prayer for Ner Tamid. This is my prayer for you. Master the art of being a witness. Make הנוני / *Hineni* a part of your vocabulary. As the title of that Peter Seller’s film I referenced earlier suggests, be there for each other. Just as you have been there for me. For this I will be eternally grateful. From the bottom of my heart — Thank You.