

Do Not Hide Your Face
Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781
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It is that time of year, so once again I have a confession to make: Despite my being a fairly traditional person, at our wedding, I walked down the aisle to very non-traditional music. Rebecca walked down the aisle to the very traditional *Erev Shel Shoshanim*. I walked the down the aisle to the theme song from Game of Thrones. I watched the HBO show religiously, and I am slowly making my way through George R. R. Martin's novels on which the series is based. Of all the disturbing aspects of the series, there is one that always stands out to me: the faceless men who hail from the House of Black and White. These assassin-monks are able to literally put on the face of another person, enabling them to find their way into otherwise impossible situations. They are able to take on the ultimate disguise by assuming the physical identity of another person. When they remove the face they are wearing, the scene is shocking and often disturbing. Why am I talking about Game of Thrones and Faceless Men? No, this is not a sermon about politics and the upcoming election. Rather, this is a sermon about you, about your face, about your presence, and why we need it.

Faces and voices are, for others, the most recognizable markers of our identity. We are recognized by our face with its many unique and distinguishing features. We are recognized by our voice when we place a phone call, especially important in the days before Caller ID (yes, I do remember those days). The Faceless Men of Game of Thrones are so disturbing to me because they disrupt our ability to trust the face and the voice of another. Seeing someone, hearing them, being in their presence, are the ways in which we build our most intimate connections. The Faceless Men challenge the reliability of our senses and thus threaten our

connections. Their presence is an existential crisis for our connection to one another. And that is precisely how I have felt about this pandemic. It has brought about a crisis in connections, and we as a community are obligated to do what we can to repair, retain, and strengthen these connections.

For the past month we have been reciting Psalm 27, the psalm for the High Holiday season. Its sacred words take on a new meaning each year. This year, I read, and reread: *al tasteir panecha mimeni*, “Do not hide Your face from me,” *al tasteir panecha mimeni*. We live in a time when our faces are hidden from one another—whether by our isolating at home or by our wearing masks in public. This temporary reality has forced us to hide our faces, and often our presence from others. The Aramaic Targum, or translation, of the psalms reads the verse in precisely this manner, לָא תִסְלֵק שְׂכִנְתְּךָ מִנִּי, “Do not remove your Divine Presence from me.” When the psalmist asks God not to hide God’s face, what they really mean is, “Do not leave me. I need you here with me.” I identify with the individual in this psalm. I also want to feel God’s presence in my life. If the psalm were written today, perhaps it would say “God, I can’t see you. You need to turn on your camera! I can’t hear you. Are you on mute?” We all yearn to feel the presence of God, and we all yearn to feel the presence of other human beings. This psalm gives voice to our longing to see one another again, *al tasteir panecha mimeni*. Do not disengage from the world. Do not turn away when the community and the world need you most. We exclaim, “I want to be present with you. I want to see you. I want to hear your voice.” What we need most at this time is the presence of one another, the presence of our community members, the presence of friends, the presence of family. Like the psalmist, I want to *feel* that I am not alone. I want to feel connected and engaged, both with the Divine Presence and with

your presence. Participate. Be present. Engage. Your presence is important because you matter, on an individual level, you are important. Your presence, or your absence, impacts others. Judaism as a religion and as a people cries out and says, we need you.

We need you because of our daily minyan. At B'nai Israel, we are committed to creating opportunities for our community members to *daven*, for our mourners to recite Kaddish, for everyone to get a free breakfast on Wednesday and Sunday mornings. When the pandemic struck and we had to close our building, we made it a priority to figure out how to maintain the daily minyan. But without the ability to physically gather, how could we recite Kaddish? How could we offer an authentic service if we could not sit together in the same space?

Rabbi Safra and I, and later the Conservative Movement overall, adopted a halakhic position that permitted us to gather a minyan over Zoom because this was a *sha'at d'chak*, or a pressing hour. During crises and unprecedented times, Jewish law permits us to innovate and develop accommodations to fit these circumstances. You may convene a minyan over Zoom, if and only if we could see 10 faces. No, it is not a perfect substitute, and that is the point of *sha'at d'chak*. In unprecedented circumstances, we innovate within the bounds of Jewish law. And we do so such that we can gather virtually to recite Kaddish and participate meaningfully in daily prayer. But we have to see the faces! I have asked, "Can someone else please turn on their video?" We need to see your faces. We need your presence. We need you to engage.

Time and again, Judaism emphasizes the importance of engaging, showing up, and participating. When a new couple is married beneath the *chuppah*, we recite the *Sheva Berachot*, the Seven Blessings. These blessings assert that God is the Creator of the World, and the greatest *shadchan*, bringing partners together with love and joy. This joy and love does not

end when the band stops playing because for a full week after the celebration the newly married couple is blessed by family and friends with celebratory meals, and each meal creates an opportunity to celebrate the wedding yet again with the recitation of the Sheva Berachot. But there is a catch: We can only recite these Seven Blessings at these special meals if there are *panim hadashot*, “new faces.”¹ If everyone sitting around the table was at the wedding, or at one of the celebratory meals thereafter, then these blessings cannot be recited again. There is a need for new faces, new people. The custom is constructed so as to create demand for new celebrants to participate, such that the joy of this newly married couple is not theirs alone, but it radiates out and becomes the joy of others as well. Your presence enhances their celebration. You are needed. Do not hide your face.

Which brings me to what I have missed most under these circumstances: being physically present with family, with friends, with you. I miss our chats during kiddush on Shabbat. I miss seeing you in the hallways after a program. I miss meeting with you in my office. I miss learning with you with only a book between us instead of a computer screen. I miss the connections, I miss the informality and the spontaneity of being in the physical presence of other human beings, especially those who I care about, and those who care about me.

The things that I love most about being a rabbi are not the things that I have been able to do well over these past few months. Oftentimes I feel more like a producer or an actor than a rabbi. For the first time in my life I thought about camera angles and camera-friendly clothing. For months, Dweck Sanctuary felt more like a production studio than *beit k'nesset*. For a time, only the clergy stood within its four walls, and only two of us at a time. We preached to empty

¹ Talmud Bavli Ketubot 7b.

pews, we *davened* with empty pews. At home, I think about what my background. I have sat in no fewer than six places in my house, trying to figure out where I can have both the best background, and the productive place to work. And the one small measure of comfort through it all is that I was able to see your faces. Even here in the sanctuary we had a screen with all of your faces, and that was the best we could do during the worst of this pandemic.

Judaism yearns for communal engagement. There is an inherent desire to bring people together, to build connections, to share in each other's *s'machot*, and to support each other in our times of distress. The way I see it, my *nachas* is yours, and your *tzuris* is mine. It is a package deal. We are, have always been, and always will be in this together. It is a sacred partnership between clergy, staff, members, and the community at large. It is a sacred partnership in which each individual person matters, where your presence matters, and where I care deeply about whether you are meaningfully engaged. This is not a plea of desperation. It is a charge to all of you, it is a divine imperative. Just as the psalmist asks that God not remove the Divine Presence from their midst, I ask that you do not remove your presence from mine. At a time when we can all legitimately claim to have Zoom-fatigue, at a time when we are all being deeply challenged by not only the circumstances of COVID-19 but also by the injustices and the civil unrest throughout this country, this is the time when we need your presence the most. This is the time when your participation matters the most.

Let me be clear: I am not just saying that you each matter because it is somehow what I am expected to say. I am serious, and I truly mean it, when I say that each of you has an impact, and that each person's participation is important. A few years ago, Tal Keinan, the cofounder of a global asset management firm based in Tel Aviv and New York, wrote a book called *God Is In*

the Crowd. One of his main points is that the Jewish people have, can, and must work together to revitalize Judaism—it is as much about building bridges between Israel and the United States as it is about building bridges between individuals. The key, he suggests, is the Wisdom of Crowds. According to this theory, demonstrated by numerous behavioral experiments, the opinions of numerous individuals, when aggregated, is more accurate than the opinion of any one individual. Keinan tested the theory himself at an investment conference where he presented. He set up a table in the lobby where individuals were encouraged to estimate the number of gumballs in a jar. The average of all the responses, what we would call the wisdom of the crowd, was estimated at just over 461 gumballs. The correct answer: 463. The closest individual guess was 467. The crowd beat the best guesser.² The wisdom of the crowd prevailed. In this model, all participants have a voice, and each voice truly makes a difference. Even if that difference is minor, it still is better than even the “best” voice on its own.

This is why we need to see your face, to feel your presence, to meaningfully engage you in our sacred work. I am committing to do my part, and I ask for you to do yours. Participate. Be present. Make your voice heard. During these challenging times, when partisanship is at its strongest and threatens to further divide us, consider what the world would be like if we could employ the wisdom of the crowd, if all voices mattered, if all voices could only be heard. Those who have remained quiet, step forward, show yourself, and speak. Those who have raised their voices to drown out others, step back, listen, and continue to use your voice but without dampening the sound of another’s. If we could only listen to one another and truly hear the voice of others, perhaps the world would be a better place, a more unified place, guided not by

² Tal Keinan, *God is in the Crowd*, p. 210.

the wisdom of the loudest, nor by the wisdom of the most powerful, but by the wisdom of the crowd. James Surowiecki of the *New Yorker* asserts that crowd wisdom works when the crowd has “intellectual diversity, independence of contribution, and a mechanism for aggregation and reconciliation.”³ This means that all voices must be heard, all voices must be their own, and we must work together to find a way to properly interpret and synchronize these voices. Anyone who has sat through a large Zoom meeting where people are not on mute knows the enormity of this challenge. But a difficult task is not an impossible one, and Judaism challenges us to take on even life’s most difficult tasks.

So let us begin by engaging, by showing our faces, by raising our voices, and by opening our ears. Let us see and hear the voices of those who are often marginalized and pushed aside. Let us see and hear the voices of those who work behind the scenes, and are rarely in the limelight. Let us not take for granted those essential workers who keep our world going when it seems to be falling apart. The behind-the-scenes work is not glamorous, but it is critically important and often under-appreciated. During this pandemic, so many critically important individuals showed up: medical professionals, facilities and maintenance staff, first responders, supermarket employees—all of these individuals showed up. They engaged. They made their faces seen, even from behind a mask. And they too deserve to have their voices heard. They count in the crowd. To them all, and to those I have not mentioned but did not intentionally omit, we owe a debt of gratitude. Thank you for showing us your faces. Thank you for staying engaged. Thank you for speaking up.

³ Tal Keinan, *God is in the Crowd*, p. 211-212.

To all of you who have been with us during this journey: thank you. Thank you to my colleagues in the clergy, to our staff, to our lay leaders, to our committee chairs, to our volunteers, and to all of our members. Each voice, each person, each face, matters in the crowd. Stay engaged, get involved, and please, show your face.

Shabbat shalom and shanah tovah.