

Sukkot, Day 2
5784

Hag Sukkot Sameah!

Several years ago, on a visit to New York City, I went to see Alex Grey's art installation. It was in some warehouse space in a part of the city I had not visited before. This was not my first encounter with his work and I was excited to see this new exhibit, therefore I made a particular effort to seek it out.

I was not disappointed. Alex Grey's work is difficult to explain, it borders between dream and nightmare. Whole rooms, including ceilings and architectural features, are painted with complex and intricate geometric designs, intimate pictures of the human experience, nature's elements and row after row of eyes follow you as you walk, sit and wander through the space. It is detailed, evocative and can be overwhelming.

I spent hours at the exhibit, alternating between examining the minutia of these paintings and letting the whole of the space envelop me. And then, while still in the exhibit, I entered a different room. I had, unexpectedly, wandered into a completely different space, a room that was intentionally distinct from all the other parts of the exhibit.

This chamber's tones were warm, like wood paneling, the light dim and placed at regular intervals around the narrow rectangular room were long, vertical paintings, squared at the bottom, round and pointed at the top, reminiscent of a gothic church window. I had found the Hall of Sacred Mirrors. Few works of art have impacted me as profoundly as this room of life-size portraits.

Viewed in sequence, each portrait takes you on an exploration of the human body and ultimately the divine experience. You approach the first painting and stand in front of a naked human form roughly the size of you. This body may or may not resemble yours, but it is a naked human form, with all the curves, shadows, highlights of healthy human flesh. Two paintings down, however, the outer layer has been removed, leaving the same size figure, but now with all muscles exposed. One more step to the right and muscles have disappeared with a web of blue and red veins, and exposed heart. Each window, each portrait shows a different level of the physical human anatomy. While fascinating, this felt somewhat distant, analytical, and medical. But this is only the beginning.

The next set of panels brings a different level of human experience, the spiritual. Complex webs of light emanate from and surround the human frame, the same frame that you are looking into as you stand there, implying that these lights are also emanating from you. These expressions combine different religious practices and beliefs. The chakras replicate the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. The Mind Lattice resembles the Ain Sof. This progresses, not surprisingly but beautifully to a variety of religious physical representations of various deities, Buddha, Jesus and others.

And then, finally, we reach the last panel, the one to the left of the door from which we entered. Though the whole space is called the “Hall of Mirrors”, this is the only panel that is actually a mirror. For the majority of the mirror, for the first time, you see you, your reflection, your body. In the approximate space where your head would be reflected, however, there is a radiant sun. You are the sun.

I am sharing all of this with you because as I dive deeper into the experience of the High Holy Days, Alex Grey’s image of the body, continuously deconstructed until we are pure light is the image that comes to mind. As we progress through Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Yamei Tshuvah and Yom Kippur, as the sound of the shofar continues to blast away our outer defenses, we are left vulnerable, open, raw, until we reach a stage of pure light. It isn’t a straight path, and some years it is felt more deeply than others, but this is the ultimate goal, we are one with God, beings of radiance.

What is missing, though, from Alex Grey’s art that Judaism does recognize is the inability to stay in that state of perfection. In Ma’ariv immediately following Neillah, after this spiritual high, after the emotional and physical peak experience, at the point where we feel our purest, we conclude with the weekday Amidah.

And here we say, as we do every day

סֵלַח לָנוּ אֱ־בֹי־נוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ.
מַחֵל לָנוּ מַלְכֵנוּ כִּי פָשַׁענוּ.

Pardon us, our Father, for we have sinned. Forgive us, our King, for we have transgressed.

What could we have possibly done in the short span since completing Neillah? How could we have “transgressed”? We most likely haven’t done anything at all. The odds of us needing to ask for forgiveness are pretty slim. Why, then, do we begin the new year immediately requesting forgiveness? Shouldn’t we bask in the sense of contentment a bit longer?

Judaism recognizes that we are not meant to be perfect beings. We are imperfect. That is how God created us, and that is how it should be. The question then becomes, what are we to do, as imperfect beings who reach for spiritual enlightenment, who strive to experience the divine, to reunite with God, our creator and source of our life?

We build a sukkah! Why a sukkah? A sukkah is not a true house. Yes, it has walls, halacha goes into great detail to determine what constitutes a wall. Yes, a sukkah

provides some shelter, however, if you have ever tried sleeping in a sukkah, you know that the “shelter” part is minimal. What then, is the spiritual function of a sukkah?

Post Yom Kippur, we are in a space of spiritual vulnerability, as close to holy beings as most of us are likely to experience. This is a difficult space to maintain. Judaism, therefore, provides us with a way to integrate the experience of the High Holy Days with our day to day life.

For some of us, the pull of Yom Kippur, this state of spiritual high, the connection we feel with the Divine, is so powerful that we would, if we could, try to maintain that state. We are not, however, permitted to step out of our lives entirely. Judaism discourages sitting out on mountain tops for years on end. We must be present to the here and now.

On the other hand, life is hard, and our defenses and walls are useful. We find comfort in them. We need them to get through. Without them, we would certainly crumble into a heap. Just as we cannot walk around without our skin to give us protection from the elements, we cannot walk around without our spiritual walls to protect us from the cruelties that life can throw at us.

Sukkot, our sukkah, reminds us, as we move out of the Holy Days and back into our routine, that we need to find a balance. We need to be both open and vulnerable and a bit of shelter, our defenses against the assaulting nature of life is ok. But, can our walls be a little less stone and brick and perhaps a bit more permeable? Can we maintain a little more vulnerability than we did before we entered into this holiday season?

Perhaps our biggest clue as to the purpose of Sukkot is the part of the halacha that tells us that we must be able to see the sky. Yes, being able to see the stars is a lovely part of the experience of sitting in a sukkah on the full moon of a clear night. But being able to see the heavens, being able to glance at the cosmos that is far greater than ourselves reminds us of the work we are to do here on this earth. We are to take the experience, the emotional vulnerability, the spiritual connection, the peak experience of Yom Kippur and bring that into our connections, our relationships that exist daily all around us. We are to bring the holy into the earthly.

As you sit in the sukkah, with walls a bit more permeable than before, as you glance at the stars, as you are pulled back from the heavens, take a moment to breathe and remember who you truly are. You have space within you that is vulnerable and pure. You are a spiritual, holy being. You are that last panel of Alex Grey’s Hall of Mirrors, the radiate brightness as great as the sun.

Hag Sukkot Sameah