

**Kol Nidre 5782**  
**September 15, 2021/10 Tishri 5782**  
**Rabbi Peter W. Stein**

Twenty years ago, we suffered the terrible attacks of 9/11. While the restrictions of the pandemic have limited what we might have done to commemorate this anniversary, I do want to begin my remarks by recognizing and remembering all those families who suffered losses that day. I pray that they find comfort and peace.

And, as we remember that day, I also am cognizant that 9/11 opened two decades of violence and loss, and I want to recognize and remember in particular the military losses over these years. I pray that their loved ones will be blessed as well.

I am also painfully aware that today, September 15, is the anniversary of two tragedies in American history. On this date in 1963, four young girls were killed in a Ku Klux Klan bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. And, on this date in 2001, Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered while planting flowers outside his store in Mesa, Arizona. Both tragic acts of blind hatred.

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I begin with these mentions not simply because of the calendar, and the significance of two decades having passed, but because of other concerns that have been weighing on my heart over this past year.

At Rosh HaShana, I framed my remarks with the question found in the Garden of Eden story...*Ayeka?* Where are you?

Today, I want to continue with the answer that Adam offers. After God calls out, Adam replies, "I heard the sound of You, and I was afraid..."

I heard You, God, and I was afraid.

The end result, of course, is that Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden. Life forevermore has been outside of that paradise.

And so many live afraid, and at a distance.

Yom Kippur is a day, in many respects, to reflect on that lack of perfection...and what we can do to improve and repair our relationships, with one another and with our community.

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Interestingly, one of the ways that this is taught in our tradition is through comparisons between Yom Kippur and Purim. On the face of it, these two holidays seem about as opposite as possible.

Purim, in the early spring, is a favorite of many children. It is a giddy, silly, raucous day. It is celebrated with carnivals and costumes and delicious treats like hamantaschen.

Yom Kippur, today, is solemn and somber. It is observed with prayer and reflection, fasting, and the hard work of soul searching and repentance.

Nonetheless, there are a set of teachings that offer, in the Hebrew, that Yom Kippur should be understood as Yom K'Purim...a day *k*, like, Purim. To be clear about the Hebrew, the full name of Yom Kippur as found in the Torah, which we will hear in several of the prayers tonight and tomorrow, is *Yom haKippurim*...literally the day which is like Purim.

The teaching is that it is only the superficial aspects of the holidays that are different, and the primary element is actually the same...pleading and praying for God's help.

In one midrash, teaching about the world after the coming of the Messiah...when we will return to the perfect world like in the Garden of Eden...only one holiday will still be observed: Purim.

On the face of it, this is because of a verse in the book of Esther that says “the memory of Purim will never cease...”.

More significantly, though, Purim focuses on disguises....not just wearing costumes, but also the description of Esther hiding her Jewish identity. And, notably, the name of God is not anywhere in the words of the Megillah, but the story points to God’s presence in a number of different ways. God is hidden, disguised, hard for us to see without searching.

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Today, Yom Kippur 2021, is a moment in time when we need to think about how we are disguised and how we are closed off: from one another and from God.

We’ve been wearing masks, of course, but for a very different reason. These are about health...but also about taking care of other people. There have been countless conversations during the pandemic about why we should wear masks. Many of them center around this important value: even when we are vaccinated, even when we are in good health, we need to take these steps because of the needs of other people. We wear the masks for others as much (if not more than) for ourselves.

The urgent need we have right now, far beyond the pandemic, is to focus our attention on the needs of other people.

We do of course have to begin with ourselves. Just like on the airplane where we are instructed to put on our own oxygen masks before assisting others, we certainly need to take care of ourselves, and be proud of who we are.

But my hope is that we will use this as a foundation, a starting point, not the end.

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This is woven into a subtle message in the number of this new year. We have begun the year 5782, and this number contains a lesson for us.

82 written out in Hebrew letters is Pey-Bet. We can take that as giving us the phrase *Panim b'panim*...face to face. This is the compelling description of Moses' intimate relationship with God...he knew God face to face.

For us, I take this image as a challenge. This is the year that urges us to rise up to a challenge: can we live trying to know one another *panim b'panim*?

This is, of course, easier to do with those who are similar to us. I assume we are all eager to nourish connections with family and friends, with those who share our vision and our view of how to live. It's comfortable and it's natural.

The harder question, in this year especially, is how we can be successful in building connections with those who have different identities and different understandings?

We can answer anti semitism by demonstrating not only our Jewish pride, but also our willingness to break down prejudice with real conversation. *Panim b'panim*.

We can answer racism by understanding what it means to be an anti-racist...far more than just not being a racist. This happens through honest and open conversation, *panim b'panim*.

Another way to express this is that we won't make progress by responding blindly to a faceless bigot. We need to show ourselves and stand face to face with those who spout antisemitism or any kind of hatred. We need to be clear and direct and not just deal in abstractions.

And through that real contact, we can make a change.

There are many different approaches to these challenges, of course, and I recognize that there are different perspectives on the best strategy to heal and build community. The fundamental principle for me is that we need to listen carefully and work hard at having true dialogue with those who might have different perspectives or opinions.

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The great eighteenth century Rabbi Eliyahu Ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, taught that while there is a general principle that every holiday is *chatsi la'Shem vchatsi lachem*, devoted half to God and half to our pleasure, there are two exceptions....Purim and Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is devoted exclusively to matters of God and the soul.

And so it is on this day, when we are free of material concerns and pleasures, when we focus on our relationship with God. And we know that since Moses knew God face to face, our goal should be the same. How do we know God *panim b'panim*? By working to establish connections with God's creations in the same intimate, open, and honest fashion.

The great sage ibn Ezra expressed it this way: the Torah teaches us to love our neighbor because the one God has created all of us...each and every one of us.

The story is told of two people who were given a challenge: identify people in the dark of night.

The first person was given a flashlight, and did what I suppose is obvious...they shined the light on their faces. It was relatively quick and easy.

The second person was not given a light, and therefore had to identify people by listening to their voices and even to the sound of their movements. It was much more of a challenge.

Initially, the first person was far quicker in being successful...but the second person developed an important and enduring talent—a special sensitivity—that served them well after the sun came up in the morning...the ability to recognize and understand people by listening carefully.

I offer this as a challenge and a possibility for us. Are we able to listen? Are we able to see, truly see, the people around us?

I've already mentioned Purim, so I'll offer this from the story of Passover as well. The ninth plague was, of course, the plague of darkness. Why was this so terrible, especially after all the earlier plagues, which brought destruction in so many ways?

Because, our tradition teaches, the darkness was so thick that everyone was frozen in place. It was impossible to move, and each and every person was left alone...isolated.

This is no way to live. We thrive when we recognize the presence and respond to the needs of others. We reach our potential when we adopt a selfless attitude.

As we've said so often during the pandemic, while the scientific and medical experts are rightly urging us to mask and to keep our distance, even these actions are not about separating ourselves. We mask, not to hide our faces, but rather to say that we see those around us who are vulnerable. We follow the distancing guidelines, not to stay apart, but instead as a way of showing our commitment to care for others.

My prayer is that when we emerge from this pandemic, we will be closer together and more sensitive to the needs of others.

In this age of masking and this time of uncertainty, I pray that we will truly see the faces of others. Even as we wear these physical covers, let us find ways to connect *panim b'panim*, face to face—soul to soul—heart to heart. In this way, we will move ever closer on our journey back to that perfect world.