

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777 (October 2, 2016).

Psalm 27 - "The Call is Coming From Inside The House"

Rabbi Haim of Tsanz would tell the following tale:

Once a man lost his way in the forest. He wandered for weeks, looking for a road that would lead him back to *civilization*. But every path he tried only took him deeper into the forest.

One day, another man, also lost in the forest, chanced upon the first man. Overjoyed, he exclaimed, "Thank goodness, I have found you! Can you please show me the way out of the forest?"

The first man laughed sadly. "You assume that I know the way out, but you are mistaken. *I am as lost as you are.*"

The second man's joy turned to *panic*. "*Then you are no help at all! What will become of us?*"

The first man thought for a moment. "I do believe I *can* help you, he said. "If I tell you of the roads I have taken, that only lead further into the forest, it will save you the trouble of trying those roads yourself. You can help me in the same way, by telling me all the ways you have tried. *Then, we can look for the right path together.*

This story introduces one of life's great, dichotomies: alone versus together.

Here is a simple true lesson: *we need others to find our way.*

Taking it a step further: we need other not only to find our way, but also we need others to understand who we are, and how we want to be in the world. That's the metaphor: finding our way out of the forest is figuring out, again, who we truly are and setting our best direction moving forward in the world. When we are linked we can understand ourselves more fully, and have different capacities.

I am going to discuss the tension between the private interior self, and the self-in-representation, and how that tension maps onto the spiritual work of the High Holidays and onto Psalm 27 that we just read together.

The projects of this season, of these *Yamim Nora'im*, these "Awesome days" mirrors this dichotomy of alone and together.

The central work of this season is *teshuvah* which literally means "return" and is most often translated as "repentance." As a translation, "repentance" is a good start, but it is a very partial description. We can imagine repentance as being done *alone* whereas *teshuva* is utterly relational. *Teshuva* is the internal practice of changing our behaviors *and* the external practice of making things right with others and repairing relationships.

Image a very dramatic death-bed scene with heartfelt apology and forgiveness and reconciliation. *Teshuva* is like that, but no one has to die - which is so wonderful! You

can have the conversation *as if* it is the last possible moment, and then instead of leaving the world, or having your friend or family member or casual acquaintance leave the world, you enter into a new year. Then you get to celebrate that you are still alive in a *sukkah!*

So *teshuva* is done together, but there is important private work as well.

We need to know who *we* are so that we can relate to others with integrity.

Think back to the two lost souls in the forest. Their positive helpful relationship *depends* on each person being honest and clear about where they have been. They can't do that if they have not been paying attention to their own individual journeys.

The Jewish introspective practice to know and improve one's self is called *heshbon haNefesh* literally "accounting of the person (or soul)." Like *teshuvah*, ideally, this is an ongoing practice, a year-round activity that intensifies at this time of year.

There are simple practices for this involving reflecting on particular qualities, positive and negative, and how we demonstrate these qualities in our behavior. There was a journaling exercise based on this that some of the participants in the Wise Aging Group did during the spring that we will do again with the next Wise Aging group in the fall and winter.

Heshbon haNefesh "accounting of the Soul" is a thoughtful, structured introspection and an excellent preparation to working on healing and strengthening relationships. Understanding the self is necessary to help minimize some of the surprising confusions that occur between self and other.

Recall what I said as in introduction to singing the round of "*Kol haNishamah*" [the last verse of Psalm 150 and the Book of Psalms] - it is not a simple task to hear and distinguish between our voice and the voice of another. We usually think and talk about (as I have been doing there) the self and others as clearly distinguished, but that is not the case.

Think of a situation where we would say we are not "objective" for example judging the talents of someone we love. Also, I expect that many of you will recognize the experience of finding something particularly annoying in another person, only to discover later, sometimes years later, that what is so annoying about that person, is that he or she reminded us of ourselves.

One way we learn from each other is very harmonious; the two lost travelers in the forest sharing their stories. Another way we learn from others is much more challenging and unpleasant. In others we catch a glimpse of aspect of ourselves that we do not like, and do not want to see on display.

Those people are our *mirrors*. Looking at them can be uncomfortable. An analogy is the way we hear our own voices on a recording, or the way we see ourselves in a photo or video tape. You would think we'd be delighted to hear ourselves and see ourselves in that way, but for many of us, the experience is unpleasant: Do I really sound like that?! I look

awful in that picture!

That is an old story and is the subject of one of my favorite Torah commentaries is on the verse:

Lev 19:34 The stranger who sojourns with you shall be as a native from among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God.

בְּאֶרְצָה מִמֶּנִּי יִהְיֶה לְכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַת לֹא כְמוֹד כִּי-גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

The verse indicates that not only do we share the bond of being a human being, created in the Divine image, but also we share with the stranger, the experience of being a persecuted minority.

“Love the stranger” Go figure!

The medieval Rabbi Shimon Yitzhaki, know by his name’s acronym, RaSHI shows the deep challenge of this mitzvah because of the danger that the stranger is our mirror. He comments on the phrase: “for you were strangers” כי גרים הייתם in a surprising way by quoting the Talmud’s instruction -

Do not accuse your fellow (man) with your own defect. [B.M. 59b]

מום שבך אל תאמר לחברך

We are commanded to love because of our commonality, despite differences on the surface, but Rashi recognizes that it is exactly that commonality that may make us *less* likely to be able to love.

No one wants to be reminded of their faults or of their history of humiliation and disgrace and so there is a tendency to turn away from suffering and need, not only because it demands something of us we might not want to give, but because it reminds us of our own fragility and painful past.

And so the distinction between alone and together is not so simple because we are relating to others through our own very particular personalities, histories, preferences and prejudices, and sometimes can get confused about who’s who when we encounter another.

I find this tension between self and other very strongly expressed in Psalm 27, The Psalm for the Season of Repentance. This psalm is traditionally said each morning and evening during the forty day period from the beginning of the Jewish month of Elul (the month that just ended at sundown), and Yom Kippur. I want us to look together at that psalm in the context of this boundary between self and other and what is inside and what is outside.

These distinctions are presented starkly in Ps 27 where the characters are the speaker, G-d and a whole assortment of “enemies.”

The psalmist seeks safety and G-d’s protection expressed in a variety of physical

metaphors. Psalm 27 could be an article in Architectural Digest with all of the constructed spaces it contains.

The psalmist wants to “dwell in the house of the Lord” and “visit G-d’s sanctuary” and to be in “G-d’s Sukkah,” and G-d’s “tent” and “protecting fort.”

All of these structures are protections from a terrifying array of enemies.

A word about “enemies.” There are lots of references to “enemies” in our psalms and liturgy. Some are actually political or personal adversaries threatening violence, some are doubters with heretical views, and some are internal obstacles - our own unhealthy and self destructive impulses, perhaps mirrored in those we call “enemies.” In this psalm, particularly in the context of it being “the Psalm of the Season of Repentance,” I find it most compelling to understand these “enemies” as our own evil and self destructive impulses. These “enemies” then are aspects of ourselves which consume, embarrass and discredit us. The challenge therefore in confronting and defeating them is a personal challenge rather than a political or military challenge. Think of the phrase: “I am my own worst enemy.”

Read this way, the retreat into seclusion under G-d’s protection is in order to be prepared to confront *internal* challenges to living a righteous, health life. The psalm is a cliff hanger, we never know if the psalmist defeats the enemies, but we do know that she sees the possibility of leaving the structures of G-d’s protection to which she wanted to retreat. The psalmist seeks the faith to encounter the Divine presence not in a secluded spiritual retreat but in a wide open landscape, *etetz hayyim*, “the land of the living”:

“If only I could trust that I will surely see G-d’s goodness in the land of the living...”

And the psalm concludes with encouragement in all our efforts to be fearless in the face of our enemies: “Be strong, take courage, and place your hope in Adonai.”

In the personal work of *heshbon haNefesh*, there can be a moment of insight that those things in the world, or in another person, that are so challenging are not “out there” at all, but are in fact part of ourselves. That a shocking and humbling moment but it is also empowering because it means we can be in control.

There is an iconic horror movie moment that I’ve been thinking about this year. You probably know it even if you haven’t seen one of the movies. It works something like this: there’s a babysitter in a quiet suburban neighborhood who begins to get repeated threatening phone calls (on a landline of course). The sense of tension and danger build steadily as the calls continue and she wonders how is it possible the threatening caller knows information about her and her actions as she blocks off all the doors and windows and barricades herself inside house.

The tension and mystery build until the police trace the threatening call and make a frenzied call back to the baby-sitter to tell her: “get out! the calls are coming from *inside* the house.” In that instant, the protective refuge, becomes a trap and what was the terrifying open landscape outside becomes a place of safety.

Minus the terror, that's the moment we're going for!

This is a vital moment of awakening for understanding ourselves and doing *teshuvah*: The recognition that what we fear, what we've been trying to barricade ourselves inside against for protection, is actually still there with us. The difference between our situation and the situation in the horror movie is that with that shocking and humbling insight, comes the realization that we can choose to be in control.

As we enter into Rosh Hashanah, and these "Awesome Days," let us please be patient with ourselves and with each other to find that path together out of the forest and to experience G-d's goodness, not in barricaded seclusion, but in the land of the living.

l'Shanah Tovah u'mitukah Tikatayvu

May you be inscribed for good and sweet new year!