

Awakening to the Divine Image

Rabbi Booth Rosh Hashanah 5777

About six months ago, I made a mistake. I downloaded Madden Mobile onto my smartphone. Like many of these games, it's extremely well designed to create a false sense of urgency. I find myself needing to check the game regularly throughout the day. Maybe there's a live event I'll miss, or maybe my league will need my team to play. It somehow manages to feel like the whole world depends on it.

What worries me is that when I play my game each morning, it's cutting into the time I used to use to check the news or read the papers. After all, the news each morning is horrific. I don't like reading about Syrian refugees as we witness one of the largest populations movements in world history. I hate reading about police brutality and brutality against the police. I have to admit the election is captivating, but more like a train wreck from which I can't tear my eyes than something I really want to know.

So it's a lot easier to play Madden Mobile and forget about the world, retreating into my own bubble. Every now and then the world insists on reminding me, though.

This summer, my family and I travelled to Israel, Greece, and Turkey on Turksih Air meaning we passed through Istanbul airport on four separate occasions. The first time we landed on our way from SFO. Exhausted, we sat down on the lower level to wait for gate to be announced. Then we made our way to the upper level for our flight. While there, I saw a Starbucks next to a traditional Turkish bakery. It tickled my funny bone, so I took a picture. And we continued on to Israel.

The next day I finally got around to posting it to Facebook. About an hour later, Islamic inspired terrorists stormed the international terminal, shooting up the security checkpoint, leaving bullet marks in the section of chairs in which we sat, overturning the little kiosk at which I had bought a seltzer water. I woke up the next morning to emails and texts wondering if I was okay. Rabbi Graff ended up having to send out a message to the whole congregation that the Booth family wasn't dead.

So for a brief moment, I felt unsettled and touched by the craziness, by this world seemingly on fire. But it passed as I continued on the trip, finding a few moments here and there to play Madden.

I worry we are intentionally deafening ourselves to our shared humanity. Yet the Mishnah in Sanhedrin teaches that God makes us from one stamp (Adam) but we are all unique. As a result, saving one life saves a whole world. Note, by the way, the Mishnah is talking about human beings, not Jews. Saving one human life saves the world. But we don't want to hear it. So I play Madden Mobile instead. I'm doing well by the way- level 35 and my team has an 84 overall score.

Sometimes something so riveting occurs that our eyes are drawn for a while. You may have seen Omran Daqneesh. This five year old from Aleppo, Syria was rescued by aid workers about a month ago. The images and video are intense. Omran rubs his eyes, wipes away some blood and plaster from his face. But he never cries. Partly, he is shell shocked. But partly, he knows there is no one to listen. Five year olds cry when they hurt because they expect a parent or trusted adult to help them. Omran knew there was no one to listen, and that crying only increased his danger. So he sits there in this video, matter of fact, accepting the horror around him.

For a few minutes he grabs all our attention and we listen and see our shared humanity. But then we get obsessed with Colin Kaepernick and the national anthem. We return to our commutes, jobs, and daily concerns and forget.

Today needs to be different, today we need to listen because today is Yom Truah: the day of sounding, the day of the shofar. Maimonides taught about the Shofar:

Uru y'shenim - Wake up, you sleepers, from your sleep! Get up, you slumberers, from your slumber! Look at yourselves – you can do better. Remember Your Creator You – you who forget what truly matters, you spend your years in pursuit of shadows, yearning for vanity and emptiness that will not help anyone nor will it save anyone, including you. Look at your souls! Contemplate deeply your actions – you can do better! Each one of you - abandon your bad behavior and your narrow thinking. It's no good for you! (MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah 3:4)

Rambam lived through disruption and violence and dislocation. He watched a golden age collapse around him. And he knew that it was easy in such a moment

to focus only our own private concerns and refuse to listen to the cries of those in pain all around us. Rambam teaches that we need to listen, to remember that the Shofar invites much broader thinking.

When we hear the Shofar, it reminds us. We know we can do better, and we know from everything we read and see and experience that we aren't doing enough even in our corner of the world, even in the places where we CAN make a difference.

The Baal Shem Tov asks: how is that we aren't blinded every moment by the divine image in the people around us? After all, God is a fiery light, and we are surrounded by people in God's image. We should spend our lives constantly aware, even blinded, by our shared humanity. His answer: just as when we hold even something small in front of our eyes to block the enormity of the sun, so we easily blot out the image of God in others.

What blocks that image? What keeps us from seeing our shared humanity? One thing that separates and blocks our vision, is fear:

On our last stop in Istanbul, we got off the plane for 48 hours. We were among very few western tourists but many tourists from Arabic and other Muslim lands. One of our coolest stops was by one of Istanbul's Synagogues. As I exited, I saw a little coffee house with rainbow umbrellas and realized I was looking at an LGBTQ hangout. I love it that the Shul and the gay coffee place draw strength from each other as they struggle to hang on to Istanbul's open cosmopolitan quality.

I saw a lot of people in Arab dress, including many women in full burkas. At first, I found the burkas off-putting, even frightening. I'm used to seeing people's faces, and the black garb seemed somehow sinister. Carol and I found ourselves on a cruise of the Bosphorous with a number of Arab tourists. I was watching one mother, dressed in a burka, holding her baby. She covered the thin eyeslit and said, "peek-a-boo" and the baby giggled. That little bit of eye was enough for the baby to play and recognize its mother. And that moment of shared humanity was enough for me to let go of my fear and see a woman and a mother who just wanted to be with her family and enjoy some vacation.

I see the corrosive effects of fear in our conversations about politics and Israel. One of my friends, Neil Blumoffe, is a Rabbi in Austin. He's one of the good guys.

He loves Israel, travelling and studying there frequently. This summer he was in the midst of organizing an interfaith trip to Israel. In the preliminary itinerary, he put a stop at Arafat's grave alongside Yad VaShem and the Israeli Knesset. Somehow the itinerary leaked, and you can just imagine the storm that ensued. He received hate mail, death threats, even an organized effort by some wealthy Jews to cow his major donors into withdrawing their support.

Now I disagree with the stop at Arafat's grave. But a few emails would have been enough to get Neil to reconsider. This fear driven response served only to alienate and hurt.

Today is Yom Truahm the day of sounding, of warning. It is Yom HaZikaron, the of memory, of remembering our shared humanity.

Fear isn't our only problem. What else blocks us? Sometimes its as simple as laziness because it feels in the moment so much easier to not look. We know looking is going to mean a lot of work, so we go to sleep and play Madden Mobile. Well, awake ye slumberers- it's time to get serious about world repair. We're busy with carpool and work and email and we don't make time for it.

Then the Shofar sounds: and it reminds us that we are connected, that our humanity binds and obligates us into a community of caring.

Sometimes we do pay attention and listen with amazing results. This past winter, a number of us were moved to gather in Kol Emeth's social hall to fill duffel bags with socks, boots, and other necessities for Syrian refugees arriving in Lesbos Greece. We sent them with some neighbors going to volunteer with relief workers. We intentionally placed a note carefully translated into Arabic in each duffel: blessings from the Jewish community of Northern California.

If even one Syrian mother, seeing her child wearing warm socks provided by Jews, rethinks what she has learned about us, we did something of great value. If even one Syrian adult, wearing warm boots provided by Israaid, the Israeli based charity helping on Lesbos, thinks differently about Israelis, remembering our shared humanity, something important has happened.

Emanuel Church in San Jose has been paying attention. A black church, they saw the growing divide between police officers and people of color and they sought a

human response. They started coffee with a cop, a program to get their religious school students to have a human interaction with a police officer.

Their 7th grade teacher said of her students,

“they haven't developed a sense that police are bad guys, that it's the cops vs. them,” Harrison said. “They don't have an innate fear of officers yet, and it's important that they have a positive first experience now, before they get older and might have a negative first experience.”

This was a chance for each to hear the other, and see their shared humanity. It let the pre-teen black kid see that the cops have families just like they do, that all they want is to get through their shift and return home to their families. And it let the Police Officers have a human encounter, to see that these pre-teens are just like their children with hopes and dreams for the future. These kind of intentional practices really can change the world.

We've been building bridges ourselves with AME Zion in Palo Alto. Their minister came and spoke brilliantly at KE on the Shabbat of MLK Weekend. I spoke at the Church the next day (I didn't do too badly myself). It is a small step, but a response in the face of hatred and racism to build friendships and connection.

The Mishnah teaches: “In a place where there are no people, strive to be mensch.” Stand up and be counted! We have to find a way to be different, a way that remembers our shared humanity and responds to the Shofar's cry for ethical behavior. We have to find that way today, and tomorrow, and the day after that.

The shofar is piercing and draws our attention. This year it can wake us up from our slumber and help us overcome our fears

Here are three things we can do right now, this week, this month.

First, we have to learn to listen better, even when we disagree. There is a KE member who is a physician. He had a patient in his practice for 20 years. Recently, she came for a visit and they chatted a bit about politics. It became clear that the physician is a Republican. Within a week she had withdrawn her medical records and gone elsewhere because she couldn't imagine a Republican being her doctor.

I challenge you to start a conversation with someone with whom you disagree, and to really listen. Do it over coffee or Shabbat dinner. Read the other paper, the one you don't usually read. And listen. Because we are committed to real meaningful political discourse in our community. We refuse to be dragged down by the soundbites and the hatred.

Second, we have to open our eyes to see the challenges of hunger and homelessness in our own area. It is very tempting to see the homeless as the other, as an object of fear, but we need to find a way to recall our shared humanity.

We used to house a men's shelter at Kol Emeth. It let us get to know people without homes as humans, guests in our home. I remember sitting with one of the guys at dinner and talking about his job, keeping his stuff in his car, and about baseball. Yet the city of Palo Alto in its infinite wisdom has banned us from hosting that shelter.

I'm not sure what the solution is, but we have to find a way both to help and to humanize those in need. We need to learn from places like the Ecumenical Hunger Program who call those in need "clients" and who work to empower their clients in so many ways.

Third, we have to recall our shared humanity in the midst of one of the great refugee crisis in modern history. The JCRC of Silicon Valley may be part of resettling refugees from Afghanistan and Syria. I'd love us to adopt a family and draw on what we learned from resettling Russian refugees to help these human beings now homeless to build homes.

In the meantime, we ought to support Israaid, the wonderful Israel based charity that helps refugees in trouble spots worldwide. We need to hear Omran's cry in the Shofar blast.

There is plenty to do. We just have to listen and act

Please rise:

Merciful God who listens;

Help us this year to listen; to really hear

Keep us aware and awake to the suffering and pain in the world around us

Remind us that we can help even if we can't always solve. We can't finish the work, but we are ready to try.

Inspire us to turn our talents and gifts in so many areas also towards human dignity, working to bring health, hope, and life to all of God's children.

And now the shofar. Tkeya. Truah. Tkeya Gedolah.

