

RH 1 2016 Drash
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Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, arrives this year as we continue to feel besieged by urgent issues: Daily acts of terrorism – in Israel, abroad, here at home. The ugly resurgence of Anti-Semitism. 65 million refugees wandering for a safe place to live. The growth of xenophobic, right-wing ideology here and throughout the world. A stalled peace process with the Palestinians and almost 2/3 of Israelis believing peace will never come. A violent, unstable culture of race relations in this country. A toxic and vitriolic election cycle here that has become a source of shame in our families and communities, and around the world. The loss of some of our most precious moral compasses like Elie Wiesel and Shimon Peres, z”l.

Yes, there are bright spots and much to be thankful and hopeful for. But on this Day of Judgment, this Yom Hadin, when the world and we are judged for our worthiness, it can feel overwhelming. How can we find and hang onto those bright spots, turn them into beacons of transformation and inspiration to lead us home to our most basic, most authentic, most righteous selves?

When the problems are big, the solutions start small. In his book on the High Holy Days, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, the late Rabbi Alan Lew reminds us of Rebbe Nachman’s holy teaching that inner healing requires self-acceptance. He wrote, *“When all we see and feel is negativity, we must search within ourselves for an aspect of goodness, what [Reb Nachman] called a white dot within the black, And then find another, and another, until these dots form musical notes. Our task, [Reb Nachman] said, is to find enough white dots to form a melody – a melody that will define our core and affirm our fundamental goodness.”*

Sing: V’asu li mikdash v’shachanti betocham. Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true. And with thanksgiving, I’ll be a living, sanctuary for you. (p.3)

In spite of the crowds flocking to shul on the High Holy Days, stepping on people's toes and fighting for elbow room between chairs, in spite of tens or hundreds, or in some places, thousands of voices coming together to sing for their forgiveness [or for their lunch, depending on the family], the work of teshuvah/repentance, of personal reflection and change we're here to do on this first of the ten days of repentance bet, is fairly lonely work. Where it really gets done is not in a packed sanctuary but rather in the privacy of our own thoughts, in the solitude of our souls. Some of us do it while taking a walk in the woods, or while quietly journaling. Some of us think deeply while driving alone in the car or staring out the window of a train. Yes, when we recognize that we need to make apologies or amends hopefully we pursue the next step of teshuvah and connect our inner work to others. But in spite of us all being here together, the primary work of teshuvah is done alone.

And yet, the deep, inner reflection that teshuvah requires is actually impossible to do on our own. We can only do it with others. But not for the reason you think. It's not only about life being most fully lived in relationship to others. It's about this: I can't possibly ever come to know myself without you. I cannot look into my own soul without looking into your eyes.

You see, *reflection* requires exactly that -- something or someone to *reflect* back to me the essence of who I am. The mirror of my soul that I am supposed to gaze into during this season of introspection doesn't exist apart from you. You *are* my mirror.

In order to see what I look like in the physical world, I look into a plane of smooth glass onto which highly polished thin sheets of metal have been attached and which reflect back to me the same image that you see when you look at me. Right? Wrong.

When I look into a mirror, I am not seeing what you see when you look at me; I'm seeing an inverted image of myself. When you look at me my right eye is on your left side. But when I look in a mirror my right eye is on my right side. We aren't seeing the same image. A mirror can't show me an accurate, full picture of who I am in this world. Only you can.

But I'm the one who knows me best! I know better than anyone what I like, what I don't like. I am the only one who is privy to my most secret thoughts, dreams and fears. I am the only one who knows how I truly feel, what I truly believe. I am the only one who knows what I mean to say when I speak. And yet, I've never, nor will I ever, see myself face to face.

My colleague, Rabbi Nilton Bonder, writes about this in his book called Boundaries of Intelligence: Senses and Spirituality in Management. Think of the people in your life with whom you are most close: your mother or father, your spouse, your children. Imagine if you're never able to see their face, to know what they truly look like, to experience their presence. What if you could only ever look at pictures of them, or see them on a screen, but never be able to stand face to face with them. How intimate or deep could your relationship be?

And yet, this is the season of return and forgiveness, the season when I really need to figure out who I am and the life I'm leading, and I can't even get a full look at myself.

We have to accept, Bonder teaches, that our sense of ourselves and the presence we generate in the world can only be fully understood in the way others reveal it back to us: in the expressions of their eyes, in the reflections of their souls, in the honesty of their words, as we live in relationship with them.

This process isn't only a necessity; it's also cautionary. Were we able to come to know ourselves fully without the input of others, we could fall prey to the dangers of self-love on one extreme, and self-loathing on the other.

We all know the myth of the beautiful Narcissus who falls in love with his own image reflected back to him in fresh lake water when he goes to drink, and his early death from thirst because he refuses to drink and risk losing the image he loves by reaching in for water. He makes the fatal error of mistaking self-love for love of the world.

In his book The Alchemist, Paolo Coehlo extends the myth and writes of a brokenhearted lake who mourns not the beauty of Narcissus but the affirmation of her own beauty that was reflected back to her in the depths of his eyes when he gazed into her waters.

With this Coehlo reminds us of the precious existential feedback loop we are to one another. Too often we forget that a core purpose of our relationships is to validate each other's sense of self-worth.

When we say, "I love you", to our children or to our spouse we're not just conveying how we feel about them. When we say, "I love you", we're also conveying to them that they are *worthy* of being loved.

On the other extreme, thinking we can independently come to know ourselves fully risks the dangers of self-loathing.

Even if we were able to gain insight into our own beings without the feedback from others, not all of us want to see our true images. The Rebbe of Premishlan taught: When a horse goes to drink from a pond he beats his hoof in the water. Why? Because he sees his reflection and thinks it's another horse that's there to drink too

so he splashes to chase this other horse away. All of us, the Rebbe admitted, live in fear of our own reflection. And, like the horse, the more we pound the water to chase it away, the bigger and more frightening it looks. Worst of all, he said, some of us avoid the water altogether.

There's a fantastic story called *The Mirror Maker* by Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish chemist, writer and survivor of the Shoah. It's about a man named Timoteo who took over his family's successful mirror business started by his ancestors long before him. While he continued their line of traditional mirrors, Timoteo also created new models that used combinations of different materials, colors and angles to produce altered images of people, giving them new perspectives on themselves and their presence in the world.

Most exciting to him was his secret project he called the *Metamir*, a looking glass that reproduced your image exactly as it appears to the person standing in front of you. The size of a credit card, the *Metamir* would attach to the forehead of someone in front of you. You'd look into it and see your reflection exactly as they were seeing you. Needless to say, the *Metamir* was a colossal failure. He tried it first on a disgruntled ex-girlfriend and saw an image of himself with rotten teeth, a foolish smile and a moronic expression in his eyes. When he tried it on his mother he saw himself as a 16-year old school boy "blond, pink, ethereal and angelic" – not the balding, slightly unkempt 30 year-old he truly was. He tried it on some friends and saw even more images of himself, no two of which were the same. Was there a single, real Timoteo?

He noted the mirrors' unusual power to reinforce good and meaningful relationships and ruin those that were running on habit. Customers weren't satisfied with what they saw in the *Metamir* when they attached it to their friends and family, and they

wouldn't buy the mirrors even at a discount. Timoteo shelved the project, and just made regular mirrors until he eventually retired.

We would rather see inverted, distorted images of ourselves, or none at all, than confront the reflections of how we truly appear to others. Maybe that's why, in our Torah reading, when Ishmael was lying under the bush parched and weak, his mother Hagar sat away from him, saying, "Let me not look on as the child dies/*al er'eh b'mot hayeled.*" Maybe she didn't want to see herself in his eyes as a mother who couldn't or didn't protest and protect him when Abraham banished them.

Hard and uncomfortable as it can be, understanding who we are and the way our presence contributes or detracts from the world's wellbeing can only be fully achieved when we account for the way others see and experience us.

The great Sufi mystic and poet Rumi said that Truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth. We know only too well what happens when people, or religions, or governments look only at their own images and think they possess the whole truth, that they know the whole story, even their own.

Our Jewish tradition courageously teaches that Truth is multidimensional. When the Talmud declares that two sides of a dispute are both words of the living God, *Elu v'elu divrey elohim chayim*, it acknowledges that people's experience of life and faith may differ and may yield them different insights and imperatives, but that they can nonetheless coexist in community, and even in family. Truth is incomplete without each reflection, and community and family are likewise diminished.

We're struggling in the United States as the connections between people of different races, socio-economic classes, political parties and faith traditions become more

strained. Our struggles are frightening not only because the growing gulfs between us make us ignorant of each other's stories and experiences. They're frightening because they keep us ignorant of our own stories and experiences that we need each other to fully understand.

In Israel the challenge is no different. To think we can achieve our dreams for a secure, vibrant and peaceful State of Israel without engaging in meaningful dialogue with those who share our land, our cities and our resources is both foolish and dangerous. Without blindly accepting someone else's version of Israel's story -- certainly not one that refuses to affirm Israel's right to exist or one that justifies and glorifies terrorism -- we can nonetheless grow immensely in our understanding of our own needs and possibilities when we open our hearts and minds to how others experience us. This is exactly the legacy of Shimon Peres, z"l -- a leader who courageously combined the relentless pursuit of his Jewish and Zionist dreams with those of all humanity.

The unfathomable and unconscionable obstacles to Jewish pluralism in Israel can only be dismantled with the same willingness on the part of those in power to understand the impact of an autocratic Chief Rabbinate on those whose spiritual and ideological freedom it restricts, and in many circumstances, denies completely.

It's not that other people's perspectives on us become the sum of our self-knowledge. Your impressions of me are not the complete me. But the insights into my being reflected in the relationships that fill my life are a critical component of my self-understanding. Without them, not only do I remain ignorant about myself, but I can also do great harm to myself and to others.

We've come together for Rosh Hashanah not only because we each have work to do on ourselves, but because we each have work to do for one another. We each have

pieces of insight into one another that we need to share and to receive in order for our personal reflections to be complete.

The Maharal MiPrague put it beautifully when he described the nature of love: rather than two hearts dissolving onto one another, love means taking a piece of ourselves and planting it into another person for them to carry. We then yearn for the other not only because we're attracted to them, but because they carry a piece of us which we need in order to be whole.

In a sense, we've each brought one another to shul today; we carry one another into this moment of introspection, and are reliant upon one another to make it work. I need my family, friends, students and colleagues – I even need my adversaries -- to help me understand who I am in this world, and I need to share with others how I experience them. We need each other for our own healing. We need each other for our own redemption.

Especially during this holy day season but also throughout the year, make the time to sit down and talk with those you care about, maybe even with those with whom you struggle, and do a personal 360°. Ask them to share their experiences of you -- your energy, your presence, your being. Be open to their insights that are a part of you, the part you can't see or know without their help.

And, no less hard, take the time to share with those you care about, those you're connected to, how you experience them -- their energy, presence and being in the world. Help them understand -- gently, respectfully, lovingly -- parts of themselves they simply cannot access without you.

We often ourselves, *'What can I do to truly make a difference in the world? What gift can I make to humanity?'* -- especially in times as troubled as ours. We forget that the

greatest gift we can give those around us, and even those well beyond us, is to work on ourselves and ensure that we are living the most noble, moral and dignified life we can. We may feel helpless in the face of suffering, poverty, racism, climate change and terrorism, but we're not. Repairing ourselves and getting ourselves right, Bonder emphasizes, is the ultimate contribution we can make to the world. Not only during the High Holy Days. Every day.

And the only way to get ourselves right is together -- as families, friends, communities, religions, races, and nations.

This is the essential tension at the heart of human life: we live and die as individuals, yet we know we're part of everything and everyone around us, too. The centerpiece of our High Holy Day prayers, the Unetane Tokef, illustrates this existential friction: *"All who walk the earth pass before You as a flock of sheep. Like a shepherd who gathers their flock... You count, number and review the soul of every living being."* Who we are and what we do in the singularity of our own lives contributes to the unfolding of a narrative that began long before us and will continue long after us. We have to learn to live in the intersection of our own lives with Life itself.

But where do the boundaries between us lie? How do I define the contours of my own being and where they intersect with yours? I know from my own life as a daughter, a mother, a spouse, a sister, and a friend, that some of the deepest pain we can experience – and cause – arises from a flawed perception of the boundaries of love. As a rabbi, an employer, a citizen – the balancing of personal with shared beliefs, values and needs is a sensitive, ongoing process. Demarcating the borders and the blending of our lives lies at the heart of all relationships.

In [Boundaries of Intelligence](#), Bonder offers a powerful teaching on how our lives intersect. Using the image of a home as a metaphor for our very being, he notes that

homes are designed with different edges and parameters that allow us to define ourselves and also with various openings to create encounters with others.

But not all openings are the same. They don't all allow for the kind of encounter that could enhance the bonds between us. And, they don't all invite the kind of communication that could deepen our own self-understanding.

Bonder describes four types of openings that allow others into the homes of our being: pictures, windows, doorways and portals, or what I'll call, gates. They each create four different kinds of relationships with the outside world.

A picture can portray a scene of great beauty, but it's static, unchanging. It doesn't invite or allow any interaction. While it creates the *sensation* of broadening our perspectives, it's simply an illusion because there's no ability to communicate, no real presence with which to interact or by which to be changed. It's a relationship of total control, explains Bonder, one that *suggests* the presence of others and of reality beyond our being, but without any actual opening to them.

A window does in fact open to the world outside, allowing us to see beyond ourselves and for others to see us as well. But the relationship created is also limited. I can see what's happening outside but it's not happening to me. And I can still exert control over the relationship: I can close the blinds, change the TV channel, walk away from my computer, or turn off my phone. Buber would describe these kinds of virtual relationships mediated through screens as I-It relationships -- those that objectify, control and limit the possibility of true presence and engagement with another.

Doors bring us face to face with another. We can choose to open or close them but once we open them we are able to move beyond our self-enclosures and we are able

to invite others into our most private space. Because of the risks involved in opening to one another, because we don't like feeling vulnerable, many of us place locks on our doors and arm our homes with alarms to signal us when something or someone unfamiliar and possibly, but not necessarily, threatening enters the space of our being. Too often, to avoid being changed by the real presence of others, we simply choose to keep our doors closed instead.

Gates, on the other hand, invite a different kind of relationship. They have a structure that continues to define our place, our ground of being. Yet they're also always open. By design they're permeable, allowing us to be both beyond and within the bounds of our being simultaneously. Gates are also often expandable, allowing us to extend the space in which we can truly meet another without losing our necessary sense of self.

How would you describe the apertures of your soul, the openings that mark the sanctuary that is your life? What are the passages through which you enter into deep and meaningful relationship with the world around you? How is it that love, compassion, spirituality, Judaism, the stories of others, the cries of those in pain, the wonders of nature make their way into your being? Where and when do you have your most meaningful encounters? What are the pictures, windows, doors or gates of your home?

Think of the opportunities we miss when we reduce people we're estranged from to static, unchanging pictures, denying them, and us, the possibility of having evolved and grown from the moment or event that tore us apart. Or when we try to insist that family or friends remain fixed in their beliefs or interests because we're afraid of how their growth will impact us.

When we watch YouTube clips of black people suffering from increased police violence, and of police officers threatened by armed and hostile civilians, is that only about them? Are those terrifying incidents not also about us? Do we just hit the remote and move on?

When 65 million refugees wander around the world fleeing war and bloodshed, their children drowning on flimsy rafts searching for safety, and they come knocking on our door asking to be let in to live their lives in freedom and safety and raise their families with dignity –just as we did less than 80 years ago -- do we keep our doors closed, or barely open, because we're afraid of the work we need to do to ensure our own safety? People also thought that letting in Jews fleeing Nazi Europe was dangerous because there could be spies or terrorists amongst us. No one denies that welcoming refugees or immigrants from countries associated with terrorism requires extreme caution and vigilance. But closing our doors and turning them into walls just turns our homes into prisons in which we are the ones held physically, and morally, captive.

Whether in our personal lives or our civic lives, there are ways to open ourselves to the world that don't only pose no risk to our identity, but that – to the contrary – enrich and enhance our sense of who we are and of whom we have the capacity to be. As some brilliant marketing for a unique Jewish organization that cares deeply about people's spiritual and communal lives states: "*Choose Your Gate, Open Your Soul, Find Your Community.*" (Yes, that's our own Sha'ar Communities.)

Making our way to the edges of our identity, venturing to the boundaries of vulnerability, opening the gateways into our souls for others to enter and share their reflections of who we are, is the place where the deepest growth and the most rewarding connection is born, and reborn. It is the place of return, the horizon that leads you home to your truest, deepest, most authentic self.

Bonder is not the first to use the image of a home and its openings as a metaphor for our lives. There is a mystical Jewish teaching that the Beit Hamikdash, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, was designed as a template for the human soul. Its layout of different spaces for gathering, for ritual, and for contemplation was meant to help bring metaphorical order and intention to the complex web of human feelings and actions that make up our experience. It included windows and gateways that allowed for different kinds of soulful and spirited encounters amongst those who made the journey to Jerusalem to commune with the Source of Life.

This is precisely the purpose of the profiles and portals of our own beings – to bring ourselves into deep and illuminating relationship with the people, the creatures, the beauty, the ideas, the stories, the pain, the despair, the hope, and the possibilities that animate the world all around us; to be open to their presence, to be changed by it, and to grow in our own self-awareness as we behold our reflections in them.

This is the real sanctuary to which you've come today, to which we've brought each other today, the sanctuary of your own being. It's one in ongoing need of attention, repair and rededication. It's one in which you can and will dwell alone and unique, but one which can only be built, and continuously rebuilt, in partnership with others.

Sing: V'asu li mikdash (p.3)