

Kol Nidre 5784 - Day of Attunement
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How many of us walk through our lives, looking at the world and people around us, rarely *really* seeing? What are the things we do not - or choose not - to see?

This is the central question Alexandra Horowitz asks in her book *On Looking: A Walker's Guide to the Art of Observation*. Horowitz begins her exploration of observation with a walk around a simple city block in Manhattan with her dog, and observes the people, the animals, the trees, the trash left behind. As an author and a teacher of creative nonfiction writing, she is a more attuned observer than most, but as she demonstrates in the pages of her book, it sometimes takes an external force to open our eyes to what we're missing. Attention is a fickle thing. Consider this: sitting here tonight, listening to this sermon right now, there are myriad things you might be missing, because you're (hopefully) paying attention to me right now – the feel of your feet in your shoes, the blood flowing through your body, your heart pumping, the cars passing by on Arastradero, or the way the trees are swaying in the breeze. Tuning out all of this relatively normal information actually serves a purpose and can be useful – we call it focus.

Horowitz's goal was to “knock [herself] awake;” to bring awareness and attention to the things around her that she overlooked or took for granted as she walked her dog around her block. She takes a series of eleven different walks, each time with a different “expert” in their given field, to see the same world through their very different eyes. Here are a few experts that stood out to me. She walks with:

- her toddler, who stops to investigate *everything* - from standpipes to shoes - with a sense of wonder and curiosity;
- a geologist, who points out the types of stones in the buildings and sidewalks, and offers brief overviews of the millions of years of history encapsulated in one aging or oxidizing cornerstone;
- a typographer, who points out the variations of lettering in signs and storefronts, and explains how different choices in fonts and formats impact our reactions to them;
- a field naturalist, who teaches Horowitz how to identify insect traces and trails left behind in plant leaves, tree bark, and even rocks;
- a physician, who is an expert in the physical examination, able to assess complex medical issues just by carefully looking at how a person walks by;
- and a woman who is blind, who experiences her city through touch and sound, and teaches Horowitz how to sense the way the wind changes when you reach the end of a city block.

Having her eyes opened to all of these different perspectives transforms Horowitz. Now, she walks around the same block and notices – looks for, even – the tiny, subtle details that were brought into view by the experts with whom she walked. She writes, “These walks re-awakened in me a sense of perpetual wonder in my surroundings – a perceptual skill typically available

only to experts and to the very young (not yet expert in being people).”¹ She goes on to explain that

We are limited by our sensory abilities, by our species membership, by our narrow attention – at least the last of which can be overcome. We walk the same blocks as dogs yet see different things. We walk alongside rats though each of us lives in the dusk of the other. We walk by other people and do not see what each of us knows, what each of us is doing – captured by the inside of our own heads.²

This is part of what I love most about the opportunity to lead our Civil Rights Journey through the American South year after year. It is an opportunity to see in new ways. Taking our teens, and now adults, too, through the deep South, walking through the museums that tell this story, seeing cotton growing in fields on the side of the road, meeting with people who experienced Bloody Sunday first hand, it brings this moment in history to life. Together, we experience a powerful re-telling of the black experience in America at the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a memorial to the thousands of victims of racial-terror lynchings across the South from Reconstruction through the 1950s.³ The thesis of those spaces is that slavery didn’t end, it evolved into a racially-imbalanced mass incarceration system. Ultimately, we leave having seen American history through a more complex, nuanced lens. We also leave with a deeper sense of empathy for the experience of Americans of color, and a sensitivity to our own privilege. Even as Jews, who know too well the dangers and sting of antisemitism, we also begin to seek understanding and develop a respect for how people might experience life differently than us, because of their race or class or gender identity. We see America in a new way, with new eyes, and cannot un-see it.

The High Holy Days offer us a finely-tuned lens through which we can view our world. These holy days offer us an opportunity to stop and carefully, critically, and intentionally look at our inner lives AND at the world around us (and, of course, the people and relationships in particular), calling us, like the *t’ruah* of the shofar, year after year, to pay attention.

What are the wonderful things, the broken things, the opportunities to help or heal or fix or listen, that we might encounter when we slow down, when we look at our world from a different angle, with fresh eyes? What will we uncover within us over the next 25 hours that will make us different in the coming year?

During these Days of Awe, and on Yom Kippur in particular, on which we wear white and imagine the day of our death, our liturgy reminds us again and again that *all* lives are finite. These days knock us awake, remind us to not lose sight of the important things in our lives; they demand that we take action sooner, rather than later.

In our *Vidui Rabba*, the Long Confession, also known as the *Al Cheit*, which we recite four times over the course of Yom Kippur, we read a long list, phrased in the first person plural - “we” - of

¹ Alexandra Horowitz, *On Looking: A Walker’s Guide to the Art of Observation*, p. 16.

² Horowitz, 263.

³ Visit <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org> for more information on both of these spaces.

ways we have missed the mark in the past year. “*Al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha*, literally, “For these sins (or transgressions) we have committed before You,” but I love the poetic translation in *Mishkan HaNefesh*: “The ways we have wronged You... and harm we have caused in Your world.” We gently strike our chest; to wake us up, to show remorse.⁴ The list is long, but here are a few that stand out tonight:

Al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha b’imutz lev, v’al cheit shechatanu l’fanecha b’tifshut peh...

The ways we have wronged You by hardening our hearts;
And harm we have caused in Your world through careless speech.

The ways we have wronged You by judging others unfairly;
And harm we have caused in Your world through disrespect to parents and teachers.

The ways we have wronged You through insincere apologies;
And harm we have caused in Your world by mistreating a friend or neighbor.

The ways we have wronged You openly and secretly;
And harm we have caused in Your world by losing self-control.

The ways we have wronged You through cynicism and scorn;
And harm we have caused in Your world through arrogant behavior.

V’al kulam, Elowa s’lichot, s’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu,
For all these failures of judgment and will, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us,
lead us to atonement.⁵

In Jewish tradition, we believe in a God who is not concerned *only* with our relationship with God, but with our relationships with each other as well - calling us to see the spark of the Divine in every person. A God whom we wrong when we wrong each other. When we look at the world through callous eyes instead of curiosity and wonder. When we focus only on ourselves instead of being attuned to the needs of those around us. And so we ask God for forgiveness. We remind ourselves that we, too, have the power to forgive.

When we look at our relationships with our friends and loved ones through the lens of this Day of Atonement – a day of attunement as well – we train ourselves to notice the subtle needs and pains of the ones we care about. We become more sensitive to them, we check in when we suspect people are hurting, we reach out and tend to that friend we haven’t talked to in a while, we engage in the work of *teshuvah*, apologize, and change our behavior when we’ve hurt someone, we listen with empathy when someone shares that we’ve hurt them (even if – especially if – we didn’t realize we caused them pain). This is part of the process of true *teshuvah*, the process of true repentance that allows for forgiveness: understanding the pain or hurt you may have caused for someone else and having true remorse in having been the cause

⁴ See more about this practice in *Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur*, footnote on p. 86.

⁵ *Mishkan HaNefesh: Yom Kippur*, p. 86-90

of that pain. You see with changed eyes. You pick up the phone before it's too late. Make the hard call. Send a text to someone you care about to just check in. It could make all the difference in the world to them to feel seen and cared about. Say you're sorry. Do the work so that you mean it. The lens of these Holy Days calls us to see a new sense of urgency in our lives.

Earlier this summer, while on vacation with my family, I got a chance to take a surfing lesson. And, while I did manage to stand up on the board, I think I walked away with more useful sermon fodder than surfing skills. One thing the instructor told us as we were going over the basic movements on dry land was, he said, the key to surfing: You go where you look. This is a rule that's true in many balance sports - skiing, cycling, even driving. When you're on a surfboard, if you look down to check your footwork, you end up in the water. If you look backwards, you end up in the water. If you look right or left, that's where you go. The key is to look forward, eyes up, to focus on the shoreline, trusting that you've got your feet in the right place and you've given yourself a clear path into shore.

We go where we look. This is certainly true for our personal lives. Dr. Oliver Sacks, the great observer of the human condition, offers this insight into the importance of perspective in our inner lives, in an essay written just days after receiving news that his cancer had returned and was terminal. He writes:

...Over the last few days, I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts. This does not mean I am finished with life. On the contrary, I feel intensely alive, and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more, to travel if I have the strength, to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.⁶

We rehearse our death on Yom Kippur to live in the present, and, as Dr. Sacks proposes, to live with humility and fortitude. We shouldn't wait. Some of us have experienced this ourselves – a life-altering diagnosis or the loss of a loved one – those moments open us up to a new sense of perspective on what is *most* important in our lives. It can heighten our attention to how we live our lives and the choices we make. Suddenly it feels more important to give our kids a hug, or tell our partner we love them, or spend time with a friend, than to worry about a to-do list or deadline at work.

We go where we look. This wisdom offers insight into this moment that we are in as a congregation as well. While an essential element of the High Holy Days is reflecting on our past in order to learn from it, the next step is trust. Trust that your spiritual footing is solid, trust that you've internalized the Jewish values of care and empathy and justice we teach here, trust that you've done the important work. And then, we can begin to move forward, together. As a congregation, we have a rich, vibrant, sixty-eight year history of exploring and wrestling with our Judaism, of celebrating in moments of joy and supporting each other through moments of sorrow; our footing is solid.

⁶ Oliver Sacks, "My Own Life," in *Gratitude*. Also available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/19/opinion/oliver-sacks-on-learning-he-has-terminal-cancer.html>

We go where we look. If we spend this new year looking backward, we'll only move backward. But, if we lift our eyes and look out onto the horizon, we can do some pretty incredible things together. We heed the lesson of the Psalmist: *Esa Einai el he-harim* - I lift my eyes to the mountains...my help comes from the Holy One."

I believe that when we lift our eyes to the horizon and we uplift our vision, we see the beauty of the relationships we have created and are creating, we see the humanity in each other. When we ask for help from the Holy One, we bring help and healing here at Beth Am.

Imagine what a bright, shining light this congregation can continue to be. What a bright, beautiful light each of us will bring into our world.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah, may we be inscribed and sealed into the Book of a life well-lived, with open hearts and wide-open eyes.