

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner
Erev Rosh HaShanah, 5776

Temple Beth Or
September 13, 2016

The Story in the Picture

Here we stand before God, welcoming a New Year, having shared in myriads of glorious victories and wrenching defeats from the last Rosh HaShanah to this one. I look up and I see the wedding of your daughter, and remember like yesterday when it was her Confirmation. I see the birth of your son, along with the years of struggles with infertility magically melting away. I feel the pain of that empty seat, the one that had always been filled by your partner, whose nod anchored me as the New Year began. Innumerable precious moments, poignant and tender, coalesce on this night.

I think of this past year, probably one of the most momentous in my life, and how you have been by my side through so much of it.

My Film Debut in the Documentary *Sitting at God's Table



- Speaking at Marriage Equality Rally on the steps of the Supreme Court



- Appearing in a video clip on the Today Show



Supreme Court divided over gay marriage

April 29th, 2015

The Supreme Court justices will now weigh the historic arguments in a case that could bring same-sex marriage to all 50 states. NBC chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell reports.

- **The marriage of my son**



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- **Becoming a grandmother**



- And through all your prayers and God's grace, a speedy recovery from my recent surgery.

NEUTRAL SLIDE

So too I reflect on the amazing year for Temple Beth Or.

- Welcoming 53 new families
- 8 new chavurot
- Expanding RALFTY from Jr. and Senior Youth Group to offer experiential programming for all grade levels
- Hiring Rabbi Citrin who has fit into our staff seamlessly and covered for me like a seasoned pro.

Through all these measures we bring so much to this High Holy Day Season.

These snapshots paint one picture. About half way through this year another snapshot began to reframe my focus.

INSERT SLIDE ONE OF JAMES AND LUCY



II. What does it mean to be for myself

This is one of my favorite recent pictures of my brother James and me. We were at a celebration for my father's 95th birthday; a cousin

snapped the shot and sent it to us from his phone. While my first thought went immediately to “score for a great hair day,” my brother winced. He said: “Sometimes I cannot look at pictures of myself. I can look in the mirror, but a picture hits me differently.”

My brother has NF Neurofibromatosis a disease that causes tumors to grow on and under the skin. The disease is not evident in young children.

Slide 2: (Flash picture of young James).



It starts manifesting itself in childhood with characteristic café ole spots on the torso. When we were kids I longed for a tan on my pale skin and was envious of my brother's beautiful caramel colored spots. It wasn't until when I was a teen that my parents learned that those caramel spots were a sign of the early stages of NF's manifestations. As my brother aged into puberty tumors began appearing on his body, arms and legs, and eventually on his face. The slow process of the tumors emergence hardly fazed James, me, or our family. We knew it was inevitable, and most of all

had that mind's eye view of the James we had known from birth with those beautiful café ole marks and the deep and generous heart.

A picture has so many stories to tell; and we, with our myopic vision, see but a sliver of what is there. So, let me paint a deeper picture of my brother James for you.

My brother has a pretty easy-going personality. He has endured all kinds of bullying and almost always let it roll right off of his back. I remember trying to fend off the bullies, but James didn't really need my help. He used to say that those bullies weren't making fun of him, they didn't even know him. James would tell us: "Their problem is within themselves not within me," – Incredible how he knew that at such a young age. And how most of us stumble time and again because we fail to internalize this essential message about self.

(If only the rest of us could have half of that wisdom when we feel threatened by the bullies that pop up in our lives)

James doesn't spend his time asking why me?; nor, does NF define who he is or how he lives his life. He is many things:

A husband,



a deputy in the Orleans Parish Sheriff's office (picture of sheriff's outfit),



A Lover of dogs (picture of dogs),



a Trekie,



An uncle



and much more. He is not NF. In his day to day life he barely gives NF a thought. (back to picture of us)



This photo gave my brother a moment's pause, but even that was not something that he lingered over. In fact, he will tell you that I have spent a lot more time thinking about this picture than he has.

What makes James not fret over what he looks like, while I worry whether it is a good hair day? It is a matter of focus – of both inner and outer nature. It is central to how one views the purpose of his/her being.

(Neutral Slide)

III. Adam I & Adam II

These High Holy Days beckon us to examine our focus, to consider not only our deeds, but also the source of our drive and commitment – the reason for our existence.

On this anniversary of the creation of the world I am drawn to a striking lesson Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches in his book *Lonely Man of Faith*, about outward verses inner focus. It is one of the touchstone lessons in the Melton Adult Learning program that has transformed the way many of you relate to your own Judaism. In sharing just a taste of a taste of Melton Adult Education I hope others of you will be motivated to learn more. Soloveitchik talks about Adam I and Adam II through the two different creation narratives in the Torah. One world created once, two narratives telling the same story each from its own point of view. The first narrative introduces Adam on the 6th day of creation, the last of all of God's creations, the one vested with dominion over all of the other creations. The second narrative introduces Adam in the Garden of Eden, the Adam in awe of the impressive gifts of this garden of wonder.

Soloveitchik describes Adam I as endowed in “the image of God” “with ... immeasurable resources... (including) the human mind capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings.” Adam I has “the mandate to subdue nature...(he) is aggressive, bold, and victory minded. His motto is success, (and) triumph over the cosmic forces.”

Adam II Soloveitchik says is also “intrigued by the cosmos.” “His inquiry is of a metaphysical nature... He wants to know: ‘Why does the world exist? What is its purpose? Who is the One who has given birth to all of this?’ ...” Adam the second “encounters the universe in all its splendor and grandeur, and studies it with the... awe and admiration of the child who

seeks the wonder in every ordinary ...event.” (Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, pp. 16 - 43)

Adam I and Adam II offer prototypes of how to approach life. Adam I views the world as a competitive, playing field. His job is to protect and expand his territory, to collect as many points as possible, to take care of his family, and to build his name and esteem through his work. Adam I's focus is on winning the outward struggle, beating the rat race, to get the most he can from the world.

Adam II on the other hand sees himself as a partner in God's world. His job is to add to the blessings of God's creations, to engage with others in building community worthy of the Creator, and to live mindful of the wonder and awe in the universe. Adam II is intent on aligning his inner drive in sync with the Divine call for a more perfect world.

In his book *The Road to Character* New York Times writer David Brooks recaptures the ideals of Adam I and Adam II for today:

*“Modernizing Soloveitchik's categories a bit, we could say that Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is the external, **résumé** Adam. Adam I wants to ... create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories.*

*“Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. (He) wants to have a serene **inner character**, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong.... Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one's own possibilities.*

“While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to ... to serve the world.

Brooks teaches that: “Soloveitchik described more than the archetypes of how human beings view the world, “he argued that (each of us) lives in the contradiction between these two Adams. The outer, majestic Adam and the inner, humble Adam are not fully reconcilable.

Adam I...—lives by a straightforward utilitarian logic. It’s the logic of economics. Input leads to output.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic. It’s a moral logic... You have to give to receive.... You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning... To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths. To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.”

Brooks, David (2015-04-14). The Road to Character (Kindle Locations 90-95). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Each of us lives in the continuum between the Adam I drive to accomplish, to build success for ourselves and our family; and the Adam II drive is to be part of something greater. The Days of Awe ask us to examine the purpose and meaning of our lives, to find ourselves through letting go of our defenses and facing our fears; to confront our heart of darkness. These Ten Days do not ask of us to bury or conquer our sins as Adam I would do, but to transform them into serving us better, and serving our world better. The Holy Days are not some sort of children’s game of who has been good and who has been bad. They are a refining tool to a greater self.

We are Yisrael, the Jewish people, whose very name YISRAEL asks us to wrestle with God, to wrestle during this season with the Divine planted within us.

Brooks advises: “that without a rigorous focus on the Adam II side of our nature, it is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You follow your desires wherever they take you, and you approve of yourself so long as you are not obviously hurting anyone else.... In the process you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped.” (Ibid p. 124)

On Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgement, before God we come clean:

- Has my year been more about conquering or character?
- Do we live with our resume or our integrity as our calling card?
- Are we more proud of the car we drive, the bling on our finger; or the footprint our actions leave behind on this earth?

Each one of us slides back and forth on that continuum between Adam I and Adam II, between self-righteous and righteous, between working hard to fulfill our own needs and the needs of our family, and recognizing our place in the cosmos.

(Back to picture of Josh)



My brother James lives predominantly on the Adam II side of the scale. He is not worried about how the outside world sees him. He does not fret over keeping up with the Jones or the Cohens. He loves with his whole heart. He makes an honest living. He is the nephew who visited my eccentric great aunt in the nursing home faithfully every week; and then, after she passed, continued the weekly visits keeping up with others he had come to know in the Jewish Home for the Aged. He is a man of character, a true mensch.

And, I? I was worried about whether it was a good hair day.

(Back to neutral slide)

And now each of us faces our own life. The photo album of this last year – our Book of Life – lies open before God. What do you see when you look at those photos of your life? What do the snapshots you have generated in this last year reveal about your resume? What do they disclose about the fiber of your soul?

Our heritage asks us to dig deeply: to consider the defeats along with the victories; to heal the wounds we have inflicted; and to forgive those who have scarred us along the way. Most importantly, the purpose of examining

our transgressions is to learn from them, to understand that part and parcel of healing our world / *Tikun Olam* – is *Tikun Atzmi* making the self whole again. Examining our failings becomes a part of what makes us whole, guiding us to choose a better way.

Ultimately, when we face these Days of Awe with integrity, not only does this season offer healing and forgiveness, it presents us the platform on which to move forward with renewed purpose and meaning. Connecting more deeply with ourselves, we align our lives with the cosmos and come ever closer to the wonder of the Divine.