

Seeing God in the Faces of Others

Let's start with the bad news...and believe me, I'm not in any way, shape or form a pessimist. We are facing natural disasters that are taxing our considerable powers of preservation and ingenuity to the breaking point. Nearly 58 years after Rachel Carson's Silent Spring outlined the disastrous consequences of our abuse of nature, we are still mindlessly fouling of our planet. The pollution we are pouring to poison our rivers and seas are eliminating countless species and endangering vital food resources. And the latest virus pandemic to plague humanity has forced us to realize that the casual actions of getting together with loved ones, going to work or school, and enjoying simple interactions with others are no longer freedoms we can take for granted. In addition to the dangers we face from our deteriorating environment, we are also seeing the growing plague of bigotry. Our world is convulsing from a toxic blend of racism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism. Just turning on the news or reading the daily papers is a sad if not depressing exercise. The bad news can seem unrelenting.

The problems are daunting but we dare not let them be overwhelming. The dangers, both to nature and to society, are real, but this is not the time for doomsday defeatism.

Our Torah portion, *Naso* (Numbers 4:21-7:89), contains a blessing that has the power to transform lives and society. The blessing is called *Birkat Kohamin*, the 3-fold Priestly blessing. The words of this blessing are found on the oldest archaeologically preserved Hebrew text dating back over 2,700 years. And this blessing, which has been recited at countless weddings, *b'nei mitzvah* and namings over the millennia, is well known to all:

יְבָרֶכֶּךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ:
יֵאָר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִחַנְנֶךָ:
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֵּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

May the Eternal bless you and protect you!

May the Eternal deal kindly and graciously with you!

May the Eternal bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!

(Numbers 6:24-26)

The significance of this act of blessing another person has some theological challenges that, for the sake of my message this week, I'll put aside. Rather, this is the time for us to fully explore the power of looking at another human being and doing our best to express our appreciation, our love, and our respect. The message is wonderfully illustrated in a teaching from the Baal Shem Tov (BESHT, 1700-1760).

The BESHT taught that when talking with someone, we should consider our interaction as if we were talking to God. He taught that the best way to address someone is to do so with the sensitivity and respect that we would have if we were to address God.

We are quite familiar with the fundamental Jewish value that every human is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Familiarity with a concept and acting on it are two different things. In truth, it is hard to overcome ingrained preconceptions about people. There may be a natural tendency to favor those who look like us, who pray, speak and think like us. The strangers, the “different” people among us, are almost universally those who are more vulnerable in society. That is the reason the Torah contains more *mitzvot*, sacred commandments for us to be loving, compassionate, and protective of the stranger than any other observance.

As an essential part of the healing of our broken society, it is time that we reemphasize the importance of seeing every human being as a reflection of God. Indeed, regardless of the color of a person's skin, that person is a reflection of God.

Regardless of one's gender, nationality, culture, age, faith or sexual orientation, every human is a reflection of God. And this sacred awareness

will inform and elevate the way we speak to one another, treat one another, and think about one another.

Let the pain a neighbor feels break our hearts. Let the joy of one in a distant land lift our spirits. Let the injustice felt by those oppressed by bigotry be a call to action for all. Let the conviction and determination by those who refuse to bend or break under the weight of hatred be our hymn of hope.

B'vrakhah,

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