

Rosh Hashanah AM sermon

Hineini. *Shofarot*: Be present, pay attention to the moment. Angel had to call Abraham twice. Forgive ourselves for thinking we are present when we are not- restart, reboot

Noticing hunger, homeless children; travelling children. What do they teach us?

Appreciation. ACCEPTANCE OF EACH OTHER

Taking my son to the dentist one morning in downtown Portland, I was taken aback by the sight of a young child, no more than 8 or 9 sitting on a heap of what appeared to be her belongings by the street corner. "Did you see that young girl; I think she was homeless," I said. "Of course she was, Mom; haven't you noticed how many homeless kids are living in Portland?" No, I really hadn't. Of course I had read some statistics, but seeing this solemn faced child sitting all alone was not a number on a page. This morning, I want to talk with you about the divinity in encountering, really encountering another human being. It may take two, three, many tries to appreciate or understand or simply tolerate someone radically different. It may mean first forgiving yourself for your own prejudice, suspicion and negativity. We have to start, start over, reboot. It is Rosh Hashanah.

This summer, our niece, Kitra, already a recognized and accomplished photo-journalist at age 23, shared some of her stories and picture. For the last few months, she has travelled - ridden the rails by jumping freight trains as she lived with a group of teens and young adults who purposefully stay outside the borders of society. They are sometimes called "the travelling children." After Kitra left, I suddenly noticed these young people everywhere; usually singing or playing an instrument, often with a canine companion, always dirty and often too loud. Kitra finds intelligence and creativity as the hallmarks of the travelling children. They live in forests outside cities, writing poetry and composing music, relying exclusively on one another, they live on the excess of society. A romanticized picture of an alternative life-style, one not so far from the hippies of another era. When they do beg for money, it is for alcohol, not drugs, our niece tells us; many of them come from upper middle class homes. Many of them refuse to go home and some are refused a return by their families. Although Kitra recognizes the dangers they sometimes face, she also admires them for their purity of vision and trust in each other; once you are accepted as one of them; they are your family and bound to you.

What do we take away from this one quirky piece of our American pie? Our society continues to separate, some rich beyond imagining, some struggling - a disappearing middle class, and many entering the ranks of the poor. These high holidays, it is not just for ourselves that we look back with wistfulness. As Americans, it is difficult to feel proud, to hold onto the ideals that our nation was founded on and which continue to inform our best leaders and citizens. We are plagued by a lack of trust in our political leaders and in each other. We are so far apart that it is difficult to summon up any commonality, any conversation. This emotional and psychological disconnect is tied to our disillusionment and mistrust of leaders and by extension, mistrust of each other. No matter how many times we hear a cry for non-partisanship, it inevitably ends up as a warring bid for party support. And so, our nation has sagged into a kind of depression and not the economic kind. Signs of depression include listlessness, loss of appetite or excessive weight gain, avoidance of human contact and loneliness, sometimes even suicidal thoughts.

Listlessness/hopelessness: voting numbers are down. Weight fluctuations: more Americans are obese and afflicted with diabetes and heart issues as a result. It is

easier than ever for people to stay at home and never have a spoken conversation. The decision by some of our youth to live “on society’s surplus, on the fringe,” as well as the decision by some others to live in fortified, armed enclaves may simply be a healthy flowering of different points of view in a democratic society. But extremes are fueled by fear. Human beings respond to fear by either pulling everything in in an effort to control what is frightening them, or by pushing away and rejecting, sometimes hating the perceived threat. Fear, control, hate. Our Jewish souls recoil at the remembrance of past incarnations of these base emotions. To depress an object is to put pressure on it. Our national psyche is crushed by tremendous weight and in response to that galling force, we must not turn on each other and on ourselves.

Teenagers often focus on the one tiny flaw which only they can see, but which prevents them from seeing themselves as truly how they are – pretty perfect! Looking at them from the vantage point of a few years later, it’s easy to lecture young adults on just appreciating themselves for who they are, that they are beautiful, have so much potential, etc, etc. What would happen if we looked at ourselves in that way at every life stage? What would happen if we turned to the person next to us and saw them as perfect? Their lines a part of their wonderful unique face, the strength in their eyes and the comfort in their voice?

A story: a well known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In the room of 200, he asked, "Who would like this \$20 bill?" Hands started going up. He said, "I am going to give this \$20 to one of you but first, let me do this." He proceeded to crumple the bill up. Then he asked, "Who still wants it?" Still the hands were up in the air. "Well," he replied, "what if I do this?" And he dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with this shoe, making it crumpled and dirty. "Now, who still wants it?" Still the hands went into the air. "My friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did with my money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20. Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But, no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in the eyes of those who love you. My husband teaches: more than that, you will never lose your value in God's loving embrace, as we are each created in God's image, *b'tselem Elohim*.

We have reason to rejoice: Just last week, the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy was revoked after eighteen years of forcing men and women who volunteered for our nation's armed forces, to lie about themselves, to dishonor themselves. It is a great step forward for our country as all people, regardless of sexual orientation

and gender are seen and accepted for who they are. Now we also must keep the march going towards the legalization of marriage for all people. It just takes one gay couple with children living next door, one lesbian school teacher, one transgender co-worker on a project, to normalize what has seemed strange and “wrong.” One at a time is how to learn acceptance and understanding. One new conversation with someone who is completely different.

There is a Facebook account where young Palestinians and Israelis are talking together, simply getting to know each other. Just the simplicity of that fact should give us all hope.

Three weeks ago, Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center addressed our community in Portland at Congregation Beth Israel. Over a thousand in the packed sanctuary listened, rapt, as he and SPLC president, Richard Cohen, talked about the ongoing struggle to curb hate groups which have risen dramatically in number since 2000. Morris and Richard and all of the people who work with them live with constant death threats and security everywhere they go. But they go and they share their amazing stories of altruism and courage.

When your soul has been numbed, seek out these *dugmas*, these models of what it really means to be created *b'tselem Elohim*. Seek out, stay and support those

people and causes who inspire you. Connect and reconnect with your Wood River Jewish community. Look at Judaism with unjaded eyes; a text or a song or a moment spent helping someone will nourish your soul in unexpected ways .

The travelling children Kitra photographs are odd looking, beyond the borders of accepted societal norms. I worry about my niece as she takes time to live with them and chronicle their lives; it is not a way of life I would choose. But they do teach us something about acceptance of those in our midst who are different, of looking at them with eyes that are loving, as we hope to be seen. They teach us that trust in each other is the surest bond. That music and poetry are as important as food. And that there is worth in every human being; we are each actually perfect in the eyes of our Creator. Muriel Barbery writes in The Elegance of the Hedgehog, "...this is the first time I have met someone who seeks out people and who sees beyond. That may seem trivial but I think it is profound all the same. We never look beyond our assumptions and what's worse, we have given up trying to meet others; we just meet ourselves. We don't recognize each other because other people have become our permanent mirrors. If we actually realized this, if we were to become aware of the fact that we are only ever

looking at ourselves in the other person, that we are alone in the wilderness, we would go crazy...as for me, I implore fate to give me the chance to see beyond myself and truly meet someone." As we meet each other, we all yearn to have the patience and the openness to really encounter that pure spark of divinity in another, to have a moment of genuineness, as Martin Buber describes "I-Thou."

This Rosh Hashanah, we remember who we wanted to be and we are called to pay attention to those around us. May the sound of the shofar demand that we notice, not critique; witness, not judge; engage, not avoid. May we see each other through luminous eyes. *Ken y'hi ratzon*, may it be so.