

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5771
Patience, Compassion and the Suspension of Judgment
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Remember the movie Groundhog Day? Bill Murray as the despondent Pittsburg weatherman, trapped on a snowy February 2nd day? During the first half of the movie, Bill's character Phil grows increasingly frustrated with his situation, forced to live the same day over and over, and resorts to womanizing, drunk driving and offensive weather reports to entertain himself. But at the prompting of his love interest, Andie MacDowell, Phil realizes he could use this time to improve himself and realign his relationships. When the cycle of Groundhog Day is finally broken, Phil has truly become a better person.

So I found myself wondering, why does Rosh Hashanah need to be 2 days? Is this just a weird Jewish Groundhog Day? Are we just going through yesterday's intense spiritual process again, or is there something different we are supposed to get out of this experience? To shed some light on this question, I turned to the 19th century Kabbalistic text *B'nai Yisachar*, written by Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov. The Dinover Rebbe shared some interesting gematria, or Hebrew word calculations, on the topic. For background, according to the Rabbinic and Kabbalistic traditions, Gematria is the endeavor of finding words that share numerical values, and therefore inform each other's meanings. *B'nai Yisachar* teaches that the Gematria for the word *Yisrael*, the Jewish people, adds up to 541, which is the sum of the

words *olam*, or world (equaling 146) and *neshamah*, or soul (equaling 395). In other words, we need both *olam* (a conscientiousness of the world outside of us) and *neshamah* (an awareness of our inner landscape and our personal mission) to make up *Yisrael*- our holy community. Rosh Hashanah, he says, is a time for *tikun*, or repair, of both our outer *olam* and our inner *neshamah*. We need 2 days for Rosh Hashanah, because each *tikun* deserves its own day of focus. From the word *linshom*, to breathe, the *neshamah* brings us inward, focusing us on our personal needs, our hopes and aspirations. From the word *l'he'elam*, to disappear, a focus on the *olam* helps dissolve our sense of self-importance, allowing us to prioritize the needs of others and affirm our commitment to the greater world. And yet, these two *tikunim* - these two days - are unified emotionally and spiritually for us. **Rosh Hashanah calls us to align our *neshamah* and *olam*; to work towards a mirroring of our inner and outer worlds.**

While many of us are accustomed to focusing on our *neshamah* during Rosh Hashanah, spending the 2nd day thinking about all the world's problems seems like a daunting task. And it's true- I certainly can feel overwhelmed by all that could use *tikun* out there. But our tradition can help us and give us a way to personalize this process. There is a rabbinic teaching that every person is a world unto himself, or in Hebrew, *adam olam katan*. Each of us is really a microcosm of the whole world, with inner lives that others can never fully know. This works on a few levels: On one hand, each human being has infinite existential value- we

matter and our lives have layers and layers of meaning. On the other hand, we have a responsibility to communicate our own assumptions and worldviews to others. Our real work is to move away from judgment of other people and give them the emotional and psychological space to move through the world in their own way, rather than simply function as a player on our own personal stage of importance. **Over the course of Rosh Hashanah, we must find the courage to hear our own inner voice as well as find the patience to acknowledge the inner world of those around us.**

10 years ago, I participated in BCI, or Brandeis Collegiate Institute, a summer program designed for young adults to explore their Jewish identities through the arts, outdoors, and study. One way that BCI tried to build communal trust and connection was the morning ritual of “flag.” Each BCIter was assigned flag duty one of the 26 mornings of the program. In addition to raising and lowering the flags for Israel and America, each of us was given the mandate to share some aspect of our *olam katan* with the group. A friend of mine, an Israeli named Hadas, had finished her army service only days before arriving in California. At her flag sharing, Hadas started out dressed in full uniform, standing rigidly at attention, leaving aside any femininity or youth and harnessing her strength in defense of the State of Israel. After a few moments, she opened her uniform button by button and shed the green fatigues like a snake losing its skin. Hadas emerged as a sexy young Tel Aviv woman, in a vibrant red top and tight jeans.

This was her “clubbing” *olam*, that sassy side of Israelis that turns heads around the world. Finally, Hadas stripped down again, revealing a childlike outfit of tank top and shorts. Barefoot, she told us that this was how she felt in her family- a young girl wanting hugs and mommy time, a child absorbed in the simplicity and protective quality of being at home. After being built up in the BCIers eyes as a soldier, a symbol of pride for the Jewish people, I understood at that moment that Hadas was a person, a young woman, a Jewish girl, who at her core, was somebody’s daughter. Hadas reminded me that every person is a world, *adam olam katan*, and the assumptions we make about that world are deeply influenced by uniforms, by exteriors, and by first impressions.

The famous Rabbi Hillel was known for modeling patience, non-judgment and compassion, the key ingredients in acknowledging each person as an *olam katan*. Hillel lived and taught at the beginning of the rabbinic period, from about 30-60CE, a time fraught with discord throughout the Jewish community, including between Hillel’s academy and that of another leading scholar, Shammai. The Talmud compliments Hillel in the following way: **“For three years, the schools of Shammai and Hillel contended, each insisting that its opinion constituted the *halakhah*. Eventually, a heavenly voice, a Bat Kol, proclaimed: ‘Both of them are the words of the living God, but the *halakhah* is according to Bet Hillel.’ Why should the students of Hillel have been granted the decision?**

Because they were pleasant and humble, teaching the opinion of both sides, and always stating Bet Shammai's view before their own."

In addition to this general attitude of tolerance and collegiality, Rabbi Hillel gave us a specific mandate in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Ancestors. *Al tadin et chavayrach ad shetaghiah leemkomo*: do not judge your fellow till you stand in his place. We can never know the inner landscape of the *olam katan* in front of us, and it is not fair to project our own *neshamah* onto someone else's situation. But the task of suspending judgment is not an easy one. When the leading Lubavitcher Rebbe of the 20th century, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, was a little boy, he asked his father, "Why do we have two eyes?" His father replied, "We should always use the right eye to judge others favorably. We should always use the left eye to judge ourselves!" I love this seemingly pithy answer. First of all, it is easy and sometimes even appropriate to use our eyes to judge others. In fact, the primary role of our senses is to gather stimuli from the world around us, and send it to our brain to analyze and react. Of course our eyes should lead us to judgments! But the Rebbe's father was onto something: when our judgments are externally focused, we create a double standard between our own actions and behaviors, and those of the people with whom we interact. And yet, each person in this room knows how painful it is to feel judged! Once again, Rosh Hashanah taps us on the shoulder with a lesson in humility: This is *Yom haDin*, the Day of Divine Judgment. **Because we are being judged- by the Master of the World, by our**

own reflective honesty, and by those from whom we ask forgiveness, we understand that we need to suspend our criticisms and judgments of others.

On Rosh Hashanah, these 2 days where the *olam* and the *neshamah* meet most deeply, we honor the legacy of *Bresheet* and the Jewish sense of Creation. We affirm our belief that every human being is created in the Divine Image, *b'tzelem elohim*. But what is the Divine Image? We know that we are supposed to imitate the **actions** of God, as the Talmud famously explains: **Just as God clothed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, so too should we clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham in his tent, recovering after his *brit milah*, so too should we visit the sick. Just as God blessed Isaac after Abraham died, so too should we console the mourner. And just as the Torah teaches that God buried Moses in the valley of Moav, so too should we bury the dead.** It's easy to see how these action-based *mitzvot* can propel us into a life of holiness. But on the level of **emotion**, or *neshamah*, what would it look to live *b'tzelem elohim*, fulfilling our highest Divine potential?

We all remember when Moses shattered the 1st set of Tablets, right after he received them on Shavuot. Both he and God were so angry and frustrated that the Israelites resorted to building the Golden Calf that the entire *brit*, the covenant of Torah, was both physically and spiritually shattered. But a few weeks later, Moses hiked back up Sinai, invited by God to reset their relationship and recapture a

sense of intimacy and commitment. It took 40 days of fasting, focus, and prayer until the 2nd set of tablets were ready, this time, a result of divine-human partnership, each with a unique role, working towards a shared vision. As Moses prepared to step away from this spiritual and physical high, God offered him one final gift. Stationed in a cleft of rock, Moses felt the passing presence of the Holy One, as God called out the 13 Attributes: *adonai, adonai, el rachum v'chanun, erech apayim, v'rav chesed ve'emet; notzer chesed la'alafim, noseh avon va'feshah v'chatah v'nakeh*. These famous words, which we recite throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy as well as on every *chag*, make up the Divine Self-Description. God wants to be known as *rachum*, womb-like in compassion; *chanun*, offering humanity more grace than we deserve; *erech apayim*, patiently stretching out the time between observation and reaction; *rav chesed ve'emet*, abundant in loving-kindness and gentle truth. These are the emotional qualities of God's highest potential, the Image of God through God's own eyes. It is **this** set of qualities that we need to mirror in order to align our *neshamah* and our *olam*, integrating our emotional landscape with the way we interact with the greater world.

Our tradition teaches us that over the course of Rosh Hashanah, God's relationship with us changes. At the beginning of the day, God ascends and sits on the Throne of Justice, *Kiseh haDin*. But when we sound the shofar, God's mercy is aroused and God moves to the Throne of Compassion, *Kiseh haRachamim*. And

this is our work too, as individuals and as a community. We must shift from a posture of judgment to a posture of compassion, just like God. We must connect our inner and outer lives, our emotions and our actions, our *neshamah* and our *olam*.

It's embarrassing to acknowledge how harsh we actually have been. It is uncomfortable to admit how many times we have snapped at a coworker, glared in annoyance at a spouse, lost our patience with our children. The rabbis, brilliantly attuned to human nature, suggested that we check in with our *neshamah* every night during the Bedtime Shema. There is a daily *viddui*, a condensed version of Yom Kippur's self-reflective confessional. We have the opportunity every night to ask ourselves the questions of the High Holidays: have we acknowledged that every person has their own inner world, an *olam katan* motivating their actions and reactions, that might have nothing to do with us? Have we suspended judgment of others, as Rabbi Hillel asked us to do? Have we guided our emotions so that we live up to God's Image, *b'tzelem elohim*? Have we remembered to move from judgment and impatience, to compassion and understanding? And if we have fallen short in these areas, in these modes of creating holy relationships, can we be honest with ourselves, learn from these moments, and make a point to improve tomorrow?

Our tradition does not ask for perfection. Our tradition asks us to live up to our own individual potential- no more, no less. We each have the potential to be patient, to suspend our stinging judgments, and to allow each other the space to grow. We have the possibility to see today not as just another Groundhog Day but as a chance to begin again and be a better version of ourselves. I bless each of us with the courage to be honest - not only over the next 10 Days, but every night upon our pillows, to align our *neshamah* and our *olam*, to overcome our anger and expand our compassion, and to bask in the light of the Divine, reflected in each others faces.

Shanah Tovah.