

Longing for Face Time
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When I learned back in July that Adat Shalom would only be holding remote, Zoom services for the High Holydays, I was overtaken by a deep sadness that I felt in the pit of my stomach. It wasn't a surprise and I think it was the only responsible course of action given the current state of the Covid-19 pandemic. And still, I found myself really bummed out. I was longing for face time, and I am not talking about the iPhone variety. Real face time, with each of you.

I love the *chagim*. I love the liturgy and the music. I love the universal themes and the rituals that are particular to our tradition. I love seeing the Adat Shalom regulars and checking in with those who show up less regularly but with whom I had meaningful interactions over the years. I love the socializing before and after services and yes, maybe even a bit during services. I love the holiday meals (Sandy is an amazing hostess and cook). And I love all the hugs. None of that will happen this year. And I will miss it all.

Given the scale of suffering that the pandemic has caused, my complaining about not having High Holyday face time may seem trite, or even somewhat indulgent. But maybe not. Because “face time” is a metaphor for something much larger.

Some of you know that the same year that I helped to found Adat Shalom, 1988, I also founded a national organization devoted to exploring the intersection between Jewish learning, Jewish values and social responsibility. Several years after our launch, we re-named the organization PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values based on the growing popularity of our flagship program, *Panim el Panim*, which brought Jewish high school students to Washington from all over North America for programs on Judaism and social activism. The phrase *Panim el Panim* comes from the Bible and it is used to describe Jacob's experience of seeing God's face in Genesis ch. 32. Later it describes the way Moses encountered God (Numbers 12 and Deut 34). So, while the modern Hebrew word *panim* means “face”, the phrase *panim el panim* suggests an encounter when you come to understand a

higher truth about what it means to be a human being who functions responsibly in relationship with others. To me, the Biblical phrase screams out, “social responsibility”. It is, in essence, face time that leads to “beloved community”, a form of community that we so desperately need today.

This kind of “face time” informed the communal culture of Adat Shalom since its founding. The purpose of the community was not to sponsor shabbat services, educational programs, life cycle events and more. Most synagogues do that but it confuses ends and means. The purpose of every event and program was to cultivate deep bonds of community and an ethos of *chesed*/lovingkindness to one another and *tzedek*/advancing justice to the world. Services, onegs, classes were a means to an end. This was putting into practice a core Reconstructionist principle coined by our beloved, Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, that “belonging comes prior to believing”. I am often asked: “What is the secret sauce of Adat Shalom?” I believe it is that we have learned the value of relating to one another *panim el panim*, in a way that values the “other” and, by extension, creates holy, beloved community. Adat Shalom has succeeded in making this the core of its communal culture.

But I am afraid that this orientation to life is in short supply in our country today. And I believe that the manifold problems we currently face—the pandemic, climate change, racism, poverty, the erosion of democracy-- will get worse unless we make a major spiritual course correction. Let me be clear. I do not believe, as our ancestors did, that worldly suffering is a result of God punishing us for bad behavior. Reconstructionists reject that rabbinic understanding of God’s power in the world.

But where I do stand with the rabbinic tradition is that I believe, as did the rabbis, that human beings have moral agency. They have choice. And every day, each human being can decide either to exclusively advance their own interests or to act in such a way that shows concern, compassion and love for our fellow human beings and for creation. This is what our tradition describes as *yeter ha-ra*, the evil inclination and *yetzer tov*, the good inclination. These are Jewish terms for selfishness and selflessness. It is that simple. To my great sorrow, over the past few years, we have witnessed a situation in America where the evil inclination is ascendant and, as a result, every one of the crises I mentioned moments ago, is getting worse and not

getting better. And that more selfish America—think of the phrase “America First”—has become a negative role model that the rest of the world is emulating.

The Bible seemed to anticipate periods of time when history would turn dark. In Deut 31 God says: “I will surely conceal my face (*haster astir panai*) because my people have turned to other Gods.” The Bible uses the same metaphor, face, this time negatively. The concealing of God’s face signals the breakdown of beloved community.

Martin Buber translates this *haster panim*, the hiding of God’s face, with the term “the eclipse of God” and he writes a whole book with that title to better understand the existence of evil in our world, including the Holocaust. Buber wrote: “When history appears to be empty of God, ... it is difficult for an individual and even more for a people to understand themselves as addressed by God. ... During such times the world seems to be irretrievably abandoned to the forces of tyranny.”

If that Buber passage sounds dark, it is intended as such. He was trying to make the case for God even in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust. A God who either could not, or chose not to act. The Yom Kippur liturgy seems designed to do something similar. First it holds up a mirror to all the ways that we have personally fallen short of living a moral and ethical life. In not so subtle ways it tells us that, because of our sins, we may not be worthy to live for another year. But then it tells us that we are capable of repentance and, if we do it with a full heart, there is the possibility of a return to a right relationship with God; to once again merit to be *panim el panim* with God. Here is the verse in our *machzor* that describes how we bring about that return: *hashivenu adonay elecha v’nashuva; chadesh yameinu kekedem*- “turn back to Godly ways and all will be good with the world.”

I don’t think it is as simple as fasting and reciting a few lines of liturgy. But, with every passing year, I become increasingly impressed how those ritual pieces remind us for the need for a course correction. And part of that course correction is reinforcing to all who we encounter, the importance of relating to all people in the spirit of *panim el panim*, seeing the other in the fullness of their humanity.

Face Time is my shorthand for how we make our world a more compassionate and loving place. To do that, we need to be inspired by acts of *hesed*. Fortunately, such acts can be found virtually everywhere, made even more obvious against the backdrop of our current crises.

- We see it in the many stories we have heard about doctors and nurses and orderlies, putting their own lives at risk, working 16-17 hour days to treat Covid-19 patients. Thousands of health care workers travelled to New York City at their own expense in March to volunteer their time with Covid patients. Some paid with their lives!
- We saw it in the life of Congressman John Lewis who, from his early 20's, was willing to sacrifice his life for the cause of civil rights in this country for Black Americans.
- We see it week in and week out in this holy community of Adat Shalom where we have created a culture of caring; where people show up for each other in such impressive numbers in times of illness, injury, loss and need. We have created a *hesed* culture that is so lacking in much of American society.

I truly believe that the antidote to the spiritual, moral and political decay of our country and the world is *panim el panim*, seeing each and every person we encounter and honoring them as mirror images of the Divine. I am longing for that kind of Face Time, not only because I miss hugging you on the High Holydays this year, but because these days, our world is so lacking in that kind of caring between people.

We can and must increase that kind of Face Time this year, even as we remain physically distant. And we must extend it well beyond the people we know, to those who are need our allyship, our time and our concern. Do it for the sake of heaven; do it for the sake of humanity; do it for the sake of the world that you will bequeath to your children.

