

9.29.19. Erev Rosh HaShana – *Panim-el-Panim* – Face-to-Face

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At Beth David, it is our custom to have volunteers greet people as they come through the door on Shabbat and holidays. Perhaps you were greeted this evening, or maybe you have volunteered to be a greeter over the course of the High Holy Days. This is a wonderful tradition, and it helps people to relax and to feel at home.

But being part of a *kehilla kedosha* – a sacred community, and helping people to feel at home shouldn't be left to just a few people. It is a responsibility that each one of us has. In greeting others, we have an opportunity to catch up with old friends, to welcome newcomers, and to form relationships. This is such an important and compelling part of being in community – it allows us to develop bonds and know that we are part of something larger than ourselves.

I have been thinking about greeting lately, and how powerful it can be.

At traditional Jewish weddings, before the huppah ceremony begins, there is an opportunity for the soon-to-be married couple to greet their guests. It is called *Kabbalat Panim* and it means literally “welcoming or receiving faces.” I have wondered why this pre-ceremony cocktail hour isn't called *Kabbalat Anashim* – receiving people, or *Kabbalat Orchim* – receiving guests. Why *panim* – why faces? What can we learn from these semantics?

There is something intimate about welcoming or receiving someone's face. It means we are looking at them and seeing them for who they are. When we stand *panim-el-panim* – face-to-face with someone, we see into their eyes, and perhaps even catch a glimpse of their soul. We behold the person in front of us.

Perhaps this is why it's called *Kabbalat Panim* at a wedding – it is the chance to behold the couple about to get married with all of their hopes and dreams and possibilities ahead, and it is the chance for the couple to behold their guests who will add joy to the wedding and who will create a network of love and support for them.

The word *panim* falls into a small category of Hebrew words that are technically singular but always take the plural form. *Panim* – face, *mayim* – water, *shamayim* – sky, *chayim* – life. There is no definitive reason for why this is, but as Rabbi Adam Zagoria-Moffet points out, these singular nouns point to multiplicity.

He writes, “these words...describe one thing *which is many*. How can something be both one and many at the same time? It can only be so if it is something which is constantly changing.

That is the meaning behind these strange Hebrew nouns – they are things which are never bound to one form...Water is never still – always moving, flowing, changing. Similarly, the sky is constantly changing – clouds moving, shapes forming, patterns developing.

The human face too, is something which never retains exactly the same form. Not only is every face different – but any one given face is constantly changing, the ticks of tiny muscles, the movement of eyes, the breath in the nostrils. Lastly, it should be no surprise that *life* is something constantly changing. That lesson is one we all learn sooner or later.”

When we stand face-to-face with someone, we take them in in their multiplicity.

In the book of Genesis, after Jacob wrestles with the man-angel and has his name changed to Yisrael, Jacob calls the place where the wrestling had occurred: Peniel. The Torah teaches (Genesis 32:31), “*ki ra’iti Elohim panim-el-panim va-tinatzel nafshi* – I have seen a divine being face-to-face, and my life has been preserved.” Or, I have seen God face-to-face and lived.

When we see someone *panim-el-panim* – face-to-face, we create the opportunity to witness the spark of divinity that each one of us carries inside, because we are truly taking the other person in – in their multiplicity, in their complexity.

They say that the eyes are the window to the soul, and according to Psychology Today: “the eyes do provide lots of information about another person’s emotional state. When people are sad or worried, they furrow their brow, which makes the eyes look smaller. Yet when people are cheerful, we correctly call them “bright-eyed.” That’s because people raise their eyebrows when they’re happy, making the eyes look bigger and brighter.

We can tell a true smile from a fake by looking at a person's eyes. The mouth shape of a smile is easy to fake—we do it all the time out of politeness. But the eyes are the giveaway: When we’re truly happy, we not only smile but also crinkle the corners of our eyes in a ‘crow’s feet’ pattern. But when people *fake* a smile, they usually forget about their eyes.”

To see someone *panim-el-panim* means that we don’t have to fake our emotions. It means we can be honest with one another and with ourselves. I wonder what it would be like for us to greet one another *panim-el-panim*. I wonder how that might transform our community.

It is brave to let another person see us for who we really are, even for just a moment. It means we must allow ourselves to become vulnerable; it means we must trust. It means we can’t fake our smile. It means we risk entering an I-Thou relationship.

20th century theologian, Martin Buber in his book “Ich und Du – I and Thou,” writes about two types of human relationships: I-It and I-Thou. In the "I-It" model, we relate to others as members of categories or as instruments of achievement. In "I-Thou" or "I-You," however, we relate with the entirety of our being to another whole person – the separation between us disappears as we truly see each other. For Buber, entering an “I-Thou” relationship is also how we experience God’s presence in the world.

I am concerned that we spend too much of our time in “I-It” relationships. Much of the time, we are in transaction mode – what do I need from this person and how quickly can I get? I-It relationships may be polite – we still say please and thank you, but when we are in “I-It” mode we do not stand *panim-el-panim*.

We do not take the time to recognize the bit of godliness in the other person, because we are focused on the other person being, well, other.

I wonder what it would mean for our community, if in the new year ahead, we were to strive to spend more time in I-Thou relationships. What if we were to engage in *Kabbalat Panim* – to welcome each other’s faces and to see each other *panim-el-panim* – face-to-face? How might that shape how we treat one another?

How might that help us to see each other’s full humanity and the spark of divinity that each one of us has inside? How would seeing each other *panim-el-panim* enable us to reach out to people we haven’t met before? Might we be more inclined to sit and talk with someone who was previously a stranger but who could be a future friend?

How would seeing each other *panim-el-panim* elevate our conversation, so that we were less frazzled and quick to get our point across, and more mindful and open to hearing what each other has to say? Even when we disagree. Especially when we disagree.

It is true that we can’t force I-Thou moments or relationships. Sometimes even with the best of intentions, we still end up with I-It. And by the way, I-It isn’t bad or wrong. I-It reminds us that we have room to grow. We have space to deepen our relationship with one another.

We have many opportunities to be in relationship with each other. Not only during Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, but throughout the year. Let us not take these moments for granted.

As we begin our personal accounting of our deeds, taking stock of what we have done well and where we may have fallen short, let us also take stock of our community.

Could we, perhaps, be more welcoming? Do we rely too heavily on our greeters to welcome people? In what ways can each of us take responsibility for standing *panim-el-panim* with one another? What might that mean for our congregation?

Let us take this year to ask ourselves as a community, are we as friendly as we think we are? Or want to be?

There is a teaching from Avot de Rabbi Natan (33) that says: when the Temple still stood in Jerusalem and pilgrims would come from all over for Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, the residents of Jerusalem would open their homes for free to the visitors. No person ever remarked to another, ‘I couldn’t find a bed to sleep on in Jerusalem,’ or ‘Jerusalem is too small and crowded for me to be able to stay over.’

In other words, there was room for everyone. Everyone was welcomed. Everyone was made to feel at home. People extended themselves to one another, even to strangers.

As we enter this new year of 5780, let us be inspired by our ancestors who opened their homes. Let us welcome one another’s faces. Let us stand *panim-el-panim* with each other.

And let us turn resolution into action.

This evening after services, as you leave the sanctuary, I encourage you to engage in *Kabbalat Panim* – receive someone's face – greet someone you don't know or don't know well. Transformation often begins with a small act.

Let us begin this new year of 5780 by wishing a stranger a *Shana Tova*, and so may we be blessed with a happy, sweet New Year, embraced by a community that truly sees us.