

Yom Kippur Sermon 5787: Seeing Others Through Gd's Eyes

Draft for speaking written by Rabbi Michael Schwab

With apologies, I want to begin by asking you to do something *uncomfortable*. I *want you* to think of a moment in your own life that you *deeply* regret. You need not enter it fully, just recall the contours and the echo, perhaps of the shame, embarrassment or remorse you might have felt. Now, imagine that moment became the *permanent* definition of who you are. One selfish decision, one cruel sentence, one foolish action, or one belief you once held, becomes your identity, *forever*. Nothing you subsequently learn or do differently, matters. No apology, no act of repair, no change of heart can revise the verdict. You remain *frozen* as the person you were on your very *worst* day.

Today, Yom Kippur, exists to ***reject*** that nightmare. For *this* day rests upon one of Judaism's most *radical* beliefs about human beings: we are *not* static. We are *not* finished products. We will *not* always be exactly who we are today. A human life is not a *verdict* already rendered; it is a *story* still being written.

This does not mean that our mistakes are inconsequential. That we can gloss them over. In fact, the *opposite* is true: Yom Kippur demands that we *name* what we have done, accept responsibility, seek forgiveness, and repair what we can, precisely *because* we believe that people *can learn* from their mistakes, grow and

change. Maimonides describes the transformation brought about by *genuine teshuvah* in breathtaking language. He wrote, “Yesterday, this person was distant...but *today*, this person is *beloved* and desirable, close and dear.” Someone who *was* distant *can* become close. Someone who *lost* the path can find a way back. Someone who *caused* hurt can learn to become a source of *healing*. We cannot be defined solely by one aspect of our lives, or by who we once were.

And *yet*, as potentially obvious and powerful as this concept is, I enter these High Holidays *worried* that in the world around us we are increasingly living according to precisely the *opposite* assumption. In fact, we seem to be getting *very* good at **flattening** one another’s identities. At treating each other, not as dynamic, growing and *changing* entities, but as static *caricatures* of real living human beings.

What do I mean? Here is an example: A congregant came to see me. He told me about one of his best friends: how much history they had and how close they had been. Clearly there was abundant love and respect in that relationship over *many many* years. And then the person said that their friend now holds X political position and voted for Y candidate and now they no longer talk. Do *you* have a dear friend or relative that holds a political view that *you* find repugnant? Perhaps, because of this, *you* no longer have a close relationship? Yet, isn’t it *also* true that

this person has many *incredible* attributes? That perhaps you share a plethora of important memories or other values? And isn't it *also* possible that this person could *change* their view over time? How many of us have transformed a complex individual, *whom we know*, into a political position. A longtime friend *becomes* the person who said that "one thing". A family member *becomes* "their view" about Israel. A person in our community *becomes* the organization they support—or refuse to support—the article they shared, the candidate they voted for, or the post they made. We take *multi-dimensional* human beings, with histories and contradictions and virtues and flaws, and (hand motions) *compress* them into a single dimension.

And once we have flattened someone in this way, something *else* happens: we make it *very difficult* for them to *ever* become anything *else*. Even when they grow, we remember the *old* version. Even when their thinking evolves, we quote what they said before, back *to* them. Even when they apologize, we replay the offense. When they move *toward* us, we sometimes remain firmly *planted* in the argument we had with them so long ago.

And so relationships fracture. Friendships become casualties of ideology. Families carry old conflicts from one gathering to the next. Communities divide into camps. We become increasingly certain not merely that the other person is

wrong, but that *we* know who that person *fundamentally* is, and we *reject* them for it. Perhaps we even demonize them. Sometimes, strangely, it can seem as though, despite the evidence of growth and of the possibility for a *positive* turn in a relationship, we act as if *nothing* has changed - as if we *want* to stay mad. And everyone suffers.

And this strikes me as a particularly *urgent* problem on Yom Kippur. Because *today* we will ask **God** to see *us* as *dynamic* human beings. We will ask *God* to look at *everything* we have done and somehow *still* believe that we can become *more*. So then the question for *us* is: are *we* willing to extend that same belief to *one another*? Can we model after Gd and *allow* *other people* to *change as well*? Or permit them to be *more* than a *single* aspect of their life? For what is true about *us* needs to be equally true about *other people*.

My observation as a rabbi and as a pastoral counselor is that we become strangely invested in the *story we have told ourselves* about another person, especially after a particularly *tough* interaction. And when reality begins to *contradict* that story—even when it contradicts it for the *better*—we instinctually resist. For example, *families* can be especially good at preserving *old* versions of us. You can be 55 years old, run a company, raise three children and manage an *enormously* complicated life—and when you go home for Thanksgiving you are

somehow still “the irresponsible one” because you lost the car keys twice when you were seventeen. Families have *long* memories. We *all* do. And sometimes it is amusing. But sometimes it is painful and harmful. Because the message we *inadvertently* communicate is: *I have already decided who you are. Nothing you do now can revise the verdict.*

The result is not only that our larger society becomes more *contentious and divisive*, which I think we have *all* observed. But our *personal* relationships become *frayed*. Our institutions work less effectively. We make poorer decisions because we stop *listening* to one another, assuming we already know what we need to know. We ruin lines of communication because we no longer have those relationships which we fractured. And, consequently, I fear that many of us, quite simply, become less *happy* and less *satisfied* with living life in this environment.

What *happens* within *one* friendship or family is *magnified* across an entire *society*. Psychologists call one aspect of this, “affective polarization”: disagreement about *ideas* becomes *distrust* of the *people* who hold them. A study by Waytz, Young, and Ginges found that we tend to imagine our *own perspective* in a *noble* way as motivated by *love* for what we value; while imagining that the *opposing* view is motivated by *hatred*, or *people with corrupted souls*. In other words: ***I** have principles; **you** have prejudices.*

Along comes the High Holidays to force us to confront the spiritual *danger* in such thinking. Because Yom Kippur asks us to consider a question that is *much* larger than politics and goes *beyond* psychology. What happens to a society that believes passionately in *judgment* but begins to lose its belief in *teshuvah*? What happens when society is dominated by *self-righteousness* and holds a diminished notion of *compassion*? What goodness—and what potential blessing—do we fail to recognize when we become *too* certain of our judgement about exactly who the other person is?

Our tradition has unique and extraordinary language to frame this problem. Near the end of the Torah, in *Parashat Ki Tavo*, Moses describes the blessings that might come to the people of Israel when they cross over into the land. The Torah says: “*U-va'u alecha kol ha-berachot ha-eleh v'hisigucha*”—“All of these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you.” The great Hasidic master, the *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, notices something *strange* about that verse. Normally, we imagine that if we want blessing, *we* would need to pursue *it*. Or at least, it is *we* who would *seek* and *discover* the blessing.

But here the Torah says exactly the *opposite*: that the blessings are pursuing *us*. They will run after us and “overtake” us. The *Degel* points out that this notion of blessing *pursuing us*, is also highlighted in one of the most *familiar* verses in the

entire Bible, from Psalm 23 - that many of us know from Jewish funeral services:

“Ach tov va-chesed yirdefuni kol yemei chayai.” “Surely goodness and mercy shall ***pursue me*** all the days of my life.” So what can we learn from this counterintuitive concept?

The *Degel* offers a remarkable answer. Blessings have to *pursue* us because *sometimes*, ironically, we actually *run away* from what is good. As he wrote (quote), “This demonstrates that sometimes we flee *even from the good* due to our *constricted and diminished* awareness . . . Therefore King David’s prayer was that goodness and love pursue *him*, asking Gd to let the blessings run *after* us and overtake us even when we don’t know to pursue them ourselves”. (end quote)

I *love* that image. We tend to think that religious life is about *searching* for blessing - and sometimes it is. However, the *Degel* says that perhaps our challenge is sometimes much simpler. All we have to do is stop running away from what is good. *Open* our eyes. *Open* our hearts. Release our preconceptions. Become quiet enough and humble enough to notice that goodness is already present, (and here is the key) not only in ourselves but even in *others*, even in those whom we have seen as opponents. Even in those with whom we have a conflict. Sometimes the blessing pursuing us may actually even be *evidence* that another human being is *better* than the story we have been telling about them. Maybe the blessing is an

apology we have been reluctant to hear and accept. Perhaps it is a *kindness* from someone we had dismissed as *incapable* of goodness. Maybe it is a conversation that *complicates* our assumptions. Perhaps it is discovering that someone we *thought* we understood, has actually changed.

And perhaps we *run from* that blessing, forcing it to pursue us, because accepting it would require something difficult from *us*. We would have to change, too. We would have to *revise* our story. We would have to *loosen* our grip on our anger. And we *might* even have to reconsider our own convictions, at least in part. Sometimes allowing the blessings to finally catch up to us, is accomplished by expanding our awareness so that we recognize the *fullness* of the other person, or how they have potentially grown, and then recalibrate our own feelings *about* them *because* of our expanded awareness.

That is precisely the possibility Maimonides portrays in his *Hilchot Teshuvah*, his Laws of Repentance. The Rambam describes the person who has truly changed: one who has admitted his mistakes, expressed regret, and has resolved to be better. And *then* Maimonides allows the penitent to make a remarkable declaration (quote): “*Ani acher, v’eini oto ha-ish she-asah otan ha-ma’asim.*” “I am *another*. I am *not* the same person who committed those deeds.” Listen carefully to what Maimonides is saying. The person does not *deny*

what he did. He does not say: It never happened. He *accepts* responsibility. But *after* all of that, Judaism allows a human being to say something extraordinary: What I did is a *part* of my story. But it is not the *end* of my story. I am different now. People *can* change, **but we also have to let them.** People *can* err, in their beliefs and convictions, but that is not the *sum total* of who they are.

So Maimonides is challenging us: When someone says, “I am no longer the person I once was,” are *we* willing to believe them? Or do we hold people captive to an earlier version because we have grown comfortable with our own judgment?

There is a beautiful story in the Talmud, in *Masechet Berakhot*. Rabbi Meir lived near people who caused him tremendous distress by their actions and beliefs. In his frustration, he literally prayed that they should *disappear*. His wife, Beruriah—one of the wisest women in rabbinic literature—challenged him. She pointed to the verse in Psalms: “*Yitamu chata'im min ha-aretz.*”, which *Rabbi Meir* had understood to mean that King David was praying that *sinner*s should disappear from the earth and so it was OK for him to do the same. But Beruriah was more precise with the grammar. She taught, the Psalm does not say, “Let the *sinner*s disappear.” It says, “Let the *sins* disappear.” “*hataim*”. Do not pray for the destruction of the *people*, Beruriah tells him, pray for the disappearance of *what is wrong within them*. Pray that they *change*. Pray for their *teshuvah*.

And according to the Talmud, that is exactly what Rabbi Meir does. And the Talmud tells us, they repented. Beruriah made a tiny grammatical distinction which contained an entire Jewish theology of humanity. There are *chata'im*—sins. There are things people do that are harmful, cruel, foolish, and even destructive. But a human being is *rarely* completely reducible to his or her *chata'im*. A person is *more* than the worst sentence they ever spoke. *More* than the worst decision they ever made. *More* than the opinion with which we most strongly disagree. *More* than the mistake we cannot seem to forget.

But, while we may accept this in theory, can *Beruriah's* distinction survive outside the pages of the Talmud? Consider the story of Derek Black. Black arrived at New College of Florida deeply involved in white nationalism. When his identity became known, the campus appropriately forcefully *rejected* his ideology. But Matthew Stevenson, an Orthodox Jewish student, in the spirit of education and encounter, *also* invited Black to the Shabbat dinners he hosted in his dormitory. And amazingly Black kept returning. Friendships formed. Difficult conversations followed. Over time, Black encountered the very human beings demeaned by the ideology he had promoted. Eventually, he publicly *renounced* white nationalism. Upon reflection, Black shared that it was crucial for his transformation that the community indeed condemned his *ideology*, forcing him to rethink. But perhaps *even more important* were the *relationships* created through those invitations to

Shabbat dinner. The lesson is: We should absolutely oppose those with ideologies that are objectionable. But we should *not* assume that our judgment of their ideas and actions at the time will become their permanent *identity as people, forever*. In this story, relationship superseded ideology and inspired real *teshuvah* and change.

This is the potential *power* of *teshuvah* - this is part of what we are *here* for today. And if we really believe it for *ourselves*, we must somehow learn to believe it for *others* as well. I think, *especially* now, for the sake of our community, we need to cultivate this truth with great care and do our best to heal our divisions. For, not only is a community divided by ideology ultimately dangerous for us, it also cuts us off from all the blessings we share around every *other* aspect of life and Judaism.

Now, I want to be careful here. Judaism does *not* teach that forgiveness means pretending nothing happened. Forgiveness does not *erase* the consequences for people's actions or convictions. Reconciliation is *not* always possible and is *not* always *appropriate* or safe. Some people may *not* be able to change. And of course, there are convictions, beliefs, and positions we must *vehemently* oppose. I spoke about *that* on Rosh Hashanah. Yom Kippur does not require us to *surrender* our judgment nor cease our activities to promote the values in which we believe. Not at all.

What it *does* ask of us, is to see “the other” as a *full* complex person, even if they are your opponent - in the same way you see yourself. Judaism *does* ask us to only place relationships in the *irreconcilable* category after serious consideration. And it *also* asks us to surrender the *fantasy* that *our judgment* is the *entirety* of another person's identity. There is a *huge* difference between saying, “What you *did* was wrong,” or “ what you *believe* is wrong” *and* saying “What you did is all you will *ever* be and what you believe is the *entirety* of who you are”. The first is morally *responsible*. The second leaves no room for *teshuvah*, and abandons any sense of humility, which is *antithetical* to Jewish belief and, I believe, is harmful to society.

How, then, *do* we preserve moral judgment without reducing another person to *our* narrow assessment of them? Judaism gives us a weekly practice and framework for precisely that combination of conviction and humility: Shabbat. For six days we act upon the world, asserting our will and our judgements; on the seventh we stop—not because the work is finished, but because we need to remember that neither the world nor the people around us exist merely as objects of *our* management. Shabbat asks us to become quiet enough to see beyond our busy passionate thoughts, beyond our projections and judgements, to what is actually there: the spouse sitting across the table, rather than the person we *wish* they would become; the child as they are now, rather than as we *remember* them; the neighbor

as a human being rather than as a political category. Perhaps, even the person with whom we are angry—not *necessarily* standing today in *precisely* the place where we left them yesterday. Shabbat *trains* us to have the humility to stop manipulating reality long enough to discover truth, which is often *so much better* than the story we had been telling ourselves.

It is striking to me that on Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, we will spend hour after hour asking God to do exactly this for *us*. We will stand here and confess (tap chest). “*Ashamnu. Bagadnu. Gazalnu. Dibarnu dofi*. We have been guilty. We have betrayed. We have acted wrongly. We have spoken hurtfully.” But *none* of us intends to walk out of this sanctuary saying: “That is who I am. I am *defined* as the person who did all of those *terrible* things”. In fact, the liturgy assumes the *opposite*. It assumes that confession is not an *accusation* of the self. Rather it is an *opening*. We name what we have *been*, precisely *because* we believe we can *become* something *else*. Something *better*. We ask God to see not only who we were *yesterday*, but who we are *presently* struggling to become, *tomorrow*.

And so how can we not do the same for each other?! We ask *God* not to imprison *us* forever inside yesterday. Can we ask that, while imprisoning someone *else* there? Perhaps we have someone in mind. Someone whose worst moment we have replayed so often that it has become, in *our* minds, their *defining* moment.

Someone whose position on *one* issue has swallowed up *everything* else we know about them. Someone who has *grown* since the last time we encountered them but we didn't yet notice.

And so, perhaps during these Days of Awe, we should ask not only, "Where do *I* need to change?" but also, "Whom have *I* **stopped allowing to change?**"

Perhaps someone is waiting for *us* to make the first call. To send the text. To say the words: "I have been thinking about you." "I don't want this disagreement to be the whole story of our relationship." "I *see* that you have changed." "I am willing to listen again to what you think." Or simply: "I miss you."

Our world certainly does not need *less* conviction. Judaism has *never* asked us to believe *less* passionately. It needs something more *difficult* to achieve. It needs conviction accompanied by humility. Judgment *accompanied* by compassion. Accountability *accompanied* by the possibility of *teshuvah*. *Relationship* as much as ideology. It needs people capable of saying both: "I believe you were wrong," and, "I believe you are more than your wrongness."

And for some of us the realization of that vision begins *here, now*, on Yom Kippur. "*Ach tov va-chesed yirdefuni kol yemei chayai*. Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall pursue me all the days of my life". *My* prayer is we have the

wisdom to let them catch up. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah*. May we all be inscribed for a wonderful year of compassion and unity. Amen.