

Welcoming Within these Walls

Erev Rosh Hashnah Sermon by Rabbi Leider 5780/2019

Shanah Tovah. It's wonderful to gather here tonight, ushering in 5780. Another year unfolds as the sun sets, holiday candles are lit, and we enter this sacred synagogue.

Most years, if I am lucky, I enter about four different synagogues. Of course, I come into this magnificent space and maybe, three other synagogues for a meeting somewhere in the Bay Area, or for going to services when I am on vacation. This isn't so surprising since I "work" here, on Shabbes. I feel comfortable in the synagogue; not surprising, you might say. Our millennia-old liturgy, shared customs and Hebrew language unite us. In a world that is constantly shifting and changing, this is a real comfort to me.

But we also know that when you do something for years, you might get a little too comfortable - you've got to shake things up a bit – you've got to shake yourself up a bit. A recent sabbatical from January through June this year, was an incredible way for my husband Jeff and for me to increase our "well-roundedness," in going to different synagogues.

But for me, during this sabbatical, it was important to open myself up to feeling disoriented in a synagogue: to feel lonely, to wish someone would come up and greet me, to not know what would happen next. Even finding the synagogue I was trying to get to, could be difficult. In Israel, most liberal synagogue communities lack a building and meet in an alternative space. Not fully funded by the government, they don't have resources for a space like this.

On a humid March night (I know, only in Israel) Jeff and I set out to find the conservative Jewish community in the beachside town of Eilat, the furthest most Southern tip of Israel, where we were staying over the Purim holiday. On a large sprawling school campus with no signage, we nearly gave up trying to find the room where the service would be. Finally, we found the tiny room with small wooden pews a humble ark for the Torah: eighteen people were there. I thought to myself, "Wow. Susan, you are really far from home." In that moment, I was transported back to Purim in this Kol Shofar Beit Knesset, filled with energy, people of all ages representing the tapestry of our community. I admit it: I was homesick.

As a rabbi, I am not used to walking into a Jewish space and not knowing anyone. I don't even have to walk into a Jewish space to recognize others from our community and to be recognized. I go

shopping, I get my hair cut, I do errands; I run into at least three or four people from the Jewish community. It is a little bit like the sitcom, Cheers. Remember? “You want to go where everybody knows your name. . . “

But on sabbatical, there were plenty of people who didn’t know my name. In five and half months, we attended services at fifteen synagogues: ten in Israel, the rest in Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Florence and Crete. Three were orthodox, most were Conservative, one renewal, and others defied denominational labels. We also visited active synagogues for a tour or saw synagogue museums.

Often, not only did no one know my name, but I didn’t know a soul. I remember standing outside a synagogue in Europe after attending Shabbat services. A bride and groom were celebrating the Shabbat before their wedding, a beautiful morning, but all through services, not a single person greeted me, apart from the mandatory security check. I had exited the grand synagogue doors, I stood on the wide veranda. Where was kiddish? Was there going to be a kiddish? If I stood there long enough, would someone notice me and let me know that I was not alone, even with the language barrier? The minutes passed, I smiled at the couple and the family, but then, it was just too awkward. I left.

The experience of being disoriented was probably the best thing that could happen to a rabbi who is comfortable in shul. It reminds me that tonight, there is someone who has come through our doors who feels more disoriented now than I felt at that synagogue in Europe. There are people here tonight who don’t know anyone else in the room. They are travelling, visiting from far away, maybe a business trip brought them to Marin and they sought a place for the holiday. There are people here tonight who have not been to a synagogue for a long time, perhaps discouraged or shooed away because their children made noise or they sat in someone’s seat, not knowing that Mr. Cohen sits in that seat every Shabbes for the last forty years. And tonight, they ventured back. They thought, “I will try this homecoming thing again. Maybe I can connect. Maybe someone will greet me. Maybe I won’t be standing awkwardly on the side, waiting. Maybe someone will see me, so I don’t feel so out of place.”

Allaying this fear is what the supreme Jewish value of welcoming guests, *Hahnasat Orh̄im*, is all about. Our ancestor Avraham models this value. God had just visited him three days after Avraham's his *brit milah*, his circumcision of entering into the covenant. Despite being in the throes of pain, Avraham abruptly turns from God to greet people he doesn't know. This ninety-something year old gets up, offers to wash their dusty feet and serve them food. All this, even though he was midway in a visit from God. The Talmud teaches that (BT Shabbas 127a) *offering hospitality is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shekinah*. Turning and greeting someone who comes through these doors is a greater mitzvah than greeting God.

There is a beautiful Hebrew phrase, *kabbalat panim*. There is somewhat of an equivalent in English: the word, "reception," like the reception desk in a hotel or in an office. But *kabbalat panim* literally means receiving the faces – not just receiving people, but literally taking in their face, taking in their being through their eyes, their mouth, their expression, their mood. This is true *kabbalat panim*, not only having greeters at a synagogue door, or a receptionist who asks his customers as they enter a place of business, "How can I help you?" *Kabbalat panim* is encountering the humanity of another person with great awareness.

In Jerusalem, I remember walking into the spiritual community Nava Tehilah. Though I had reached out to Rabbi Ruth via email, she didn't know who I was. The large basement was filling up with young twenty-somethings for a vibrant Friday night service. Rabbi Ruth sat in the inner circle of chairs, we sat almost behind her. We felt like we knew no one. Early in the service, she happened to turn and smile at me and the others in my row. Wow, her smile made me feel so much more comfortable and welcome. I relaxed into my seat and let the prayers flow over me. Through a kind smile, I felt seen.

The Torah talks about a certain type of *kabbalat panim*, the importance of being seen. Many times, the Torah describes a person bringing gifts for the festivals, being seen by God: *ye-ra-eh et panei ha Adon*. The Torah tells us, "No person comes empty-handed." What a beautiful model for us to consider: that each person who walks in our doors deserves to be seen, to be acknowledged for their innate

gifts, because no one is indeed empty-handed. Everyone has something to give, something we can appreciate, something we can learn from.

My neighbor Mike knows all about *kabbalat panim*. Mike lost his sight several years ago, but no matter. He has other ways of making me feel seen. Mike can hear my voice; he likes it when I wear red, as he can see the vague outlines of my face better when contrasted with a brightly colored top. He greets me, he hugs me, he receives me, he welcomes me. Mike is an inspiration to me: his heightened awareness despite his limited sight, reminds me that we can all do the mitzvah of *kabbalat panim*.

This is what we do when we welcome others at Kol Shofar – when we **go out of our comfort zone, break out of our comfortable friend group and venture into a conversation with someone new.** For those of us who are Kol Shofar members, we can make *kabbalat panim* easier, to receive others, to connect and re-connect by the simple act of **wearing our nametags** when we enter the shul.

Kabbalat panim is an entrée to *Hahnasat Orhim*. Avraham had to see his guests first, he had to receive them into his consciousness and then he could bring them into his world with his whole personhood. We are invited us to go deeper into our relationship with others, to take a chance, make a new connection with someone we don't know. Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah has *shivoi'm panim*, seventy different faces, representing seventy ways into the tradition. When **we face another human being**, we offer them a path into community, a path into Torah: each of us represents a possibility. Who knows what you might discover? Things in common, what to share, maybe even an opportunity for connection outside these walls. The way that we behave towards others within these walls help to condition us for how we behave towards others outside these walls.

Maybe Avraham wasn't turning away from God at all, but rather turning toward the essence of God that was in the face of the stranger. That is what I felt with the warmth of a smile from Rabbi Ruth or in a hearty handshake of greeting from an American tourist, a visitor himself, in the Berlin synagogue. I felt the presence of God envelop me. And I remember the times, when I missed that kindness and warmth in other communities, when I longed for that connection in a place where I felt

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alone. And I know that there are others who feel this out in the world and that how I behave out in the world can make a difference.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I am grateful to be home. On this Rosh Hashanah, I welcome the visitor in our synagogue home. On this Rosh Hashanah, I carry with me the resolution to remember what it is like to feel lonely in shul and to do what I can to let God's presence shine through me to greet another, to let them know: you are not alone, I have been there too. But Avraham reminds us, it doesn't have to be this way. We just need to look up, take the face in front of us into our hearts and welcome the other. It's good for our shul. It's good for the world.

Shanah Tovah.