

THE EAST 55TH STREET CONSERVATIVE SYNAGOGUE
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

ימים עראים



DAYS OF AWE

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HASIDIC TALES

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

These teachings were written to be delivered orally, rather than to be distributed in writing. The style (and period violation of the rules of grammar and sentence structure) reflect that intent. Please read them in that spirit.

ROSH HASHANAH #1

My very first Hasidic tales I heard from [my grandfather]. He made me enter the universe of the Baal Shem and his disciples, where facts became subservient to imagination and beauty. What difference did it make that events and chronological dates no longer matched? I surely didn't care. What mattered to me was not that two and two are four, but that God is one. Better still: that man and God are one.

I can still hear my grandfather's voice: "There will, of course, always be someone to tell you that a certain tale cannot, could not, be objectively true. That is of no importance; an objective Hasid is not a Hasid."

So writes Elie Wiesel.¹

Shanah tovah, welcome to the East 55th Street Conservative Synagogue. Welcome to the world of stories, of poetry, the world of the imagination, the world of hope and faith. Welcome to the universe of the Baal Shem Tov, and his disciples, the ḥasidim, who told stories that transformed Judaism, that transformed Jewish thought, and that transformed Jews.

Throughout these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, we will be telling and hearing stories of the ḥasidim, as recorded by Elie Wiesel, Martin Buber, and others.

What is ḥasidism? When I speak of ḥasidim, I'm not so much talking about ḥasidic Jews today, in Borough Park and Williamsburg. I want to take us back to the foundations of ḥasidim, to the Carpathian Mountains in Poland some 300 years ago.

Judaism at that time -- perhaps in response to the failure of certain messianic movements, had become extremely rigid and excessively strict. It was a dry, very controlled Judaism, suspicious and contemptuous of anything outside the scholarly elite.

And along comes Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov. When exactly? No one knows. Where exactly? Again -- no one knows. As Wiesel points out, despite living in relatively modern times -- he was, for example, a contemporary of Kant and Voltaire -- the Baal Shem seems to have eluded history. Nevertheless, there are countless stories about him -- of miracles he worked and lives he transformed. All of which are 100% true, though of course, no one knows if they are at all factual.

And the facts actually, are irrelevant. It's the stories, and their impact, that matter. What matters is that at some point the Baal Shem Tov appeared on the Jewish scene and initiated what we would now call a Jewish renewal movement. He blew on the dying embers within countless Jewish souls and they burst into flame. He restored dignity and a sense of purpose to simple people who loved Judaism and loved God, but perhaps weren't so learned, or maybe didn't follow all the rules exactly right -- often because they worked from sunrise to sunset just to put food on the table. The Baal Shem found God everywhere and in every one -- he taught us that Torah can be found not only in books but in lives. In stories.

So, why now? Why ḥasidism, and why specifically ḥasidic stories, on the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe? Rav Naḥman of Bratslav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, said it this way: "If one is to believe what people say, stories are written to put them to sleep; I tell mine to wake them up."²

1. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (tr. by Marion Wiesel) (New York: Touchstone Books, 1972), p. 7.
2. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p 179.

That's what ḥasidism did -- it woke Judaism up. And it's what the Yamim Noraim are supposed to do for us -- wake us up.

So tonight, I want to tell you one of Rav Naḥman's wake-up stories:

The king had sent a letter to a wise but skeptical man, who in his faraway province, refused to accept it. He was one of those people who think too much, who complicate their lives by complicating small things. He couldn't understand, not in the slightest, what the king might want of him: "Why would the sovereign, so powerful and so rich, address himself to me, who am less than nothing? Because he takes me for a philosopher? There are more important ones. Could there be another reason? If so, what reason?"

Unable to answer these questions, he preferred to believe the letter a misunderstanding. Worse: a fraud. Worse yet: a practical joke. "Your king," he said to the messenger, "does not exist." But the messenger insisted: "I am here, and here is the letter, isn't that proof enough?"

"The letter proves nothing at all; besides, I haven't read it. And by the way, who gave it to you? The king in person?"

"No," confessed the messenger. "It was given to me by a royal page. In his name."

"Are you sure of that? And how can you be sure that it comes from the reigning sovereign? Have you ever seen him?"

"Never. My rank does not permit or warrant it."

"Then how do you know that the king is king? You see? You don't know any more than I."

And without unsealing the letter, the sage and the messenger decided to learn the truth once and for all. They would go to the end of the world, they would question the very last of mortals, but they would know.

At the marketplace, they accosted a soldier: "Who are you and what do you do?" -- "I am a soldier by trade and I am in the king's service."

"What king?" -- "The one to whom we swore allegiance; this land is his. We are all here to serve him."

"Do you know what he looks like?" — "No."

"Then you have never seen him?" — "Never."

The two companions burst into laughter: "Look at him! This man in uniform insists upon serving someone he has never seen and will never see!"

Further on, they met an officer: yes, he would willingly die for the king; no, he had never had the honor of seeing him, neither from close by nor from afar. A general: same questions, same answers, clear and precise. He, too, thinks of nothing but to serve the king, he lives only for him and by him; and yet, even though he is a general, he cannot boast of ever having set his eyes upon the king.

"You see?" says the skeptical sage to the messenger. "People are naive and credulous, and rather foolish; they live in a lie and are afraid of the truth."³

Now, you may have guessed by now that this is a metaphor. As I read this story (and there are many ways of reading it), the king is God. The letter is the Torah. The sage -- a man of the enlightenment, whose philosophical education has led him to agnosticism or atheism. The messenger -- an ordinary Jew, seduced away from Judaism by the philosopher. The soldier, the officer, the general -- individuals at various levels of spiritual attainment.

3. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, pp. 172–74.

As we read the story, we know, because the narrator has told us, that there is in fact a king. But we are permitted -- even encouraged -- to sympathize with the skeptical sage. It seems crazy to devote one's life to the service of a king one has never seen, who may not even exist.

But the essence of the story is in the punchline: "People are naive and credulous, and rather foolish," says the sage, "they live in a lie and are afraid of the truth." Who, really, fears the truth? Well, why wouldn't the sage read the letter?

Because it is of course he who is afraid:

- afraid to believe that he's being called, that something, someone wants something of him;
- afraid of being disappointed, of learning it was just a misunderstanding;
- afraid of being wrong, of being taken in by a scam or a practical joke;
- afraid of feeling like a fool;
- afraid of asking unanswerable questions (which are, in truth, the only way to arrive at deep truths).

And of course, the story is about us, about how we approach these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, and what they're all about. "Why," the sage asks, "would the sovereign address himself to me?" I said earlier that the letter from the king, which the sage refused to read, is the Torah. It is also this prayerbook, and Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. A letter addressed to each one of us, personally.

Why? What does God want of me? That is a question we can never really answer. But we can answer this one: how will we respond?

This is a story about faith, but not only faith in whether there is a God. It's about faith in meaning beyond what we can see. Faith that our deeds might really matter, that our lives might really matter, that we really matter. Faith that we can be better than are. Faith in the possibility of forgiving and being forgiven, that our power to harm is matched by our power to heal. Faith in the possibility of transformation and redemption. Faith in teshuvah -- repentance, but also return -- return to a truer self, return to who we once were, or to who we are meant to be and have not yet been. Faith that the king might indeed be calling, and faith in teshuvah in its other sense: that we have an obligation to respond.

Faith in this sense is a choice -- and what we choose to believe depends very much on our courage.

"People are naive and credulous, and rather foolish," says the sage, "they live in a lie and are afraid of the truth." Who *really* is afraid, and who is courageous? It doesn't take much courage to avoid risk -- if we choose to believe that there is no meaning or higher calling -- we can leave these days, this prayerbook, and those scrolls unopened, and stamp them return to sender. We can go on with our lives unchanged, without the discomfort of asking unanswerable questions, confident that we haven't fallen for the trick. Or we can enter into the story, the mystery, the possibility. We can take seriously the possibility that there is meaning, and that what we do matters enormously. That the king is calling.

It is riskier, no doubt. Who knows what we will learn if we open the letter? What our mission might turn out to be? But of course, we risk being a fool whatever choice we make. And as Rav Nahman himself said: "It is better to be a fool who believes everything than a skeptic who believes nothing, not even the truth."

Why ḥasidim, and why ḥasidic stories? Let's go back to where we began, and the words of Elie Wiesel:

I can still hear my grandfather's voice: "There will, of course, always be someone to tell you that a certain tale cannot, could not, be objectively true. That is of no importance; an objective Hasid is not a Hasid."

He was right. The Baal Shem's call was a call to subjectivity, to passionate involvement; the tales he told and those told about him appeal to the imagination rather than to reason. They try to prove that man is more than he appears to be and that he is capable of giving more than he appears to possess. To dissect them, therefore, is to diminish them. To judge them is to detach oneself and taint their candor -- in so doing, one loses more than one could gain.⁴

That's the call of the Yamim Noraim; it's what we're doing here. We're here to prove that we are more than we appear to be, and that we are capable of giving more than we appear to possess. We're here not to learn that two and two are four, but that God is one -- better still, that we and God are one. That's what it's about.

And like the Baal Shem, I am making a call to subjectivity -- to passionate involvement. Hasidism is about -- stories are about -- poetry, not science, imagination not history. They seduce us to enter in, to be moved; they want to be experienced, not evaluated.

In that sense what I'm asking is profoundly counter-cultural. We are trained to detach, dissect, and analyze -- to maintain critical distance. Rarely do we simply partake, invest, participate. Even in the arts, when we go to the theater or a concert, our idea of participating is listening for something to critique; when we're not doing that, we are largely a passive audience. Rarely do we have the courage to be swept away, to dream someone else's dreams and envision their visions, to embrace ideals, to be moved -- to have faith.

Sadly, many of us live much or all of our lives as fine critics, cautious about engaging, partaking, investing -- even in our relationships, in the things most precious to us, even sometimes, in our selves. Detachment is much safer -- the critic, after all, puts nothing on the line, is never exposed, takes no risks, and never gets hurt.

And certainly, many of us approach religion -- enter this sanctuary -- in the same mode. But, as Wiesel says about stories: "To dissect them . . . is to diminish them. To judge them is to detach oneself and taint their candor -- in so doing, one loses more than one could gain." Our task on these days is to re-attach ourselves in all the ways we have become detached -- to reconnect to each other, to ourselves, to our hearts and our souls, our joys and our pains, to our faith and hope, to God. Truly we have lost far more than we have gained -- often without even knowing it. Today, we have the opportunity to reclaim those losses.

I invite you -- I implore you -- to *enter* these Yamim Noraim -- to allow the liturgy, and the music, and these stories to appeal to your imagination. To really be here -- fully present, rather than standing at a distance.

I can assure you that at some point in these three days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every single person who walks through these doors (including Marcos and me) will find something to critique and complain about -- something that disappoints or annoys us, offends or angers us, or that we think is just plain wrong. It may be (will likely be!) something I say or do, or something in the prayerbook, or the behavior of someone else in the room. There will be plenty of opportunities to slip into that critical mode, to detach and assess. You are free to do that -- you can choose to critique the envelope rather than reading the letter, and thereby protect

4. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 7.

yourself from feeling foolish. It is your choice. But, as Wiesel says, in doing so you will lose more than you could possibly gain.

I implore you instead to allow yourself to be passionately involved -- to allow yourself to be moved. To open to the possibility that somewhere in this book, in this room, in the voice of our ḥazzan (who happens to have the same name as the Baal Shem's ḥazzan, but that's purely a coincidence, I'm sure), in the person next to you, in your heart, is a message from God -- addressed to you -- a letter, waiting to be opened, if you have the courage to do so.

Another great ḥasidic rebbe, the Kotzker, Rabbi Menahem Mendl of Kotzk said: "I became a ḥasid because in the town where I lived there was an old man who told stories about zaddikim. He told what he knew, and I heard what I needed."⁵ So throughout Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I'm going to tell you stories. I'll tell what I know, I hope you'll each hear something you need.

We'll close with the words of Elie Wiesel:

Are we worthy of these tales and legends? It all depends. Are we still able to repeat them without impairing their innocence? It all depends. Are we still able to recite, with fervor and gratitude: *aleph, beith, gimmel, daleth*, the way [the Baal Shem Tov] once did, a long time ago, to free us from exile by the word? Are we still capable of beginning all over again?⁶

5. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2 (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), p. 270.

6. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 38-39.

ROSH HASHANAH #2

Shanah tovah. Welcome to the East 55th Street Conservative Synagogue, and welcome once again to the world of the Baal Shem Tov, his disciples, and their stories. As I explained last night, throughout these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, we'll be hearing ḥasidic tales -- not about the ḥasidic world of today, in Borough Park and Williamsburg, but stories from the early days of ḥasidim, some 300 years ago, in the Carpathian Mountains.

So here's a story. This one is about the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of ḥasidism) and another man, who would eventually become one of his foremost disciples.

This is the story of how Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef of Polnoye found his way into the Hasidic fold:

One morning he arrived at the Sharogrod synagogue and found it empty.

"Where are the faithful?" he asked the shamash.

"At the market."

"All of them? At this hour, when they should be praying?"

"Well, you see, there is this stranger there, telling stories. And when he speaks, one doesn't want to leave."

"What impudence! Go and bring him here at once!"

The shamash had no choice, he obeyed as was his duty. He ran to the market, made his way through the crowd and transmitted the order to the storyteller.

"Fine," the stranger said calmly, "I am coming."

The rabbi did not get up to receive him: "Who are you and how dare you divert this community from the ways of God?"

"Don't get angry," said the visitor, "a rabbi like you ought never to give in to anger. Instead, listen to a story."

"What! More stories! Your insolence seems to have no limits! You'll pay for this!"

"Anger is something one must learn to control," the visitor said gently. "Listen to me..."

And there was in his voice a certain quality that troubled the rabbi and he fell silent. He could not keep himself from listening, never before had he felt such a need to listen.

"This is a story that happened to me," said the Baal Shem Tov. "I was riding in a coach drawn by three horses, each of a different color, and not one of them was neighing. I could not understand why. Until the day we crossed a peasant on the road who shouted at me to loosen the reins. And all at once, the three horses began to neigh."

In one blinding flash the rabbi of Sharogrod understood the meaning of the parable. For the soul to vibrate and cry out, it must be freed; too many restrictions will stifle it.

And he began to cry. He cried as he had never cried before: freely, spontaneously, without apparent reason. What happened later is well known: Rebbe Yaakov-Yosef became one of the pillars of the new movement.⁷

What is this story about? On the surface, it's the story of ḥasidism itself -- a Jewish renewal movement that revived and revitalized an overly rigid, stultified Judaism. But like all good stories, this one has many meanings. It's not only about the 18th century struggle for the Jewish soul -- it's about our struggles for our own souls.

7. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, pp. 40–41.

What exactly happens to Reb Yaakov-Yosef that causes him to sob uncontrollably, to change course and become a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov? Here are some possibilities.

Perhaps he identifies with the driver of the coach, the Baal Shem, and his tears are tears of repentance for his failures as a leader: his restrictiveness has stifled his followers' souls. Maybe he's been too demanding, holding people to too high a standard. Or, maybe he's held them in too low esteem. He kept the reins too tight because he expected the worst rather than the best of people. Now he weeps because he realizes the damage he's caused with his distrust and his fear of being taken advantage of. He realizes that his image of how people were supposed to be had been more important to him than the actual people around him.

We too may identify with the driver of the coach -- not only when we're in formal positions of authority, but in any relationship. When and why in our lives do we keep people on very tight reins, and what is the cost, to them, and to us?

But here's another reading altogether: maybe Reb Yaakov-Yosef identifies not with the driver, but with the horses; it's his own soul that has been silenced by excessive restriction, excessive rigidity. Maybe he's been holding *himself* to too high a standard. What a relief to realize it isn't necessary! Maybe his religious life -- his life's work -- has become stifling. So focused on doing everything "right," he's lost his passion, and now he's just going through the motions. Suddenly his soul weeps with longing for the fire and joy he once felt. Or, maybe he's been keeping some part of himself (his emotions, his dreams, his playful side, his desire to sing, his longing to love) under such tight wraps, that the moment the Baal Shem suggests that he "loosen the reins," it all comes pouring out

Why am I telling this story on the first day of Rosh Hashanah? Because this is a story about teshuvah, our primary obligation on these days of Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe. What is teshuvah? Teshuvah is spiritual work, soul work. The word itself carries a cluster of interrelated meanings. It means to repent, to regret, to seek atonement. It means to turn, to change direction; and to return -- to God, to our true selves, perhaps even to a true self we were meant to be and have not yet been. It means to restore -- to restore the purity of our souls, the essential integrity of our being. And it means to answer, respond.

And this story is about one of the deepest levels of teshuvah: "In one blinding flash the rabbi of Sharograd understood the meaning of the parable. For the soul to vibrate and cry out, it must be freed; too many restrictions will stifle it." If we are to return, if we are to restore all the lost parts of ourselves, we have to loosen the reins that strangle the soul.

What are the reins that need loosening? It's different for each of us, but generally, the reins are anything which keeps our true self from emerging:

- our unrealistic expectations, of others and of ourselves, which only serve to frustrate us
- other people's expectations of us, when they conflict with our own values or our own own vision
- habitual ways of behaving, thinking, responding
- an old self image which is no longer, or never was, true
- personal, or national, history that weighs us down -- old hurts and losses, angers and grudges, disappointments
- harsh self-judgment, which almost inevitably translates into harsh judgment of others
- fears of losing our dignity, of not knowing, of feeling like a beginner, of losing control, of being too emotional
- the illusion of perfection, too rigid a vision of the "right way"
- the illusion of control over our environment, and over other people.

These are just examples -- we all have things we hold onto tightly that don't serve us well, that keep us from encountering and fully expressing our life force -- that keep our souls from vibrating.

As to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, and the particular reins he needed to loosen -- that's left to our imagination. What we do know is that he changed direction -- he turned. And that he apparently found some part of himself that had gotten lost along the way. We know that in one moment his anger left him. And we know that he wept. He cried like he'd never cried before -- always a good sign of authentic teshuvah. To quote Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, "tears are the sweat of the working soul." And by the way, tears are effective too; both the Talmud and the Zohar teach that the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but authentic tears are the key to every door -- they always ascend.⁸

Now, you may legitimately ask, what about the other aspects of teshuvah: *heshbon hanefesh* (the accounting of the soul), disciplining ourselves, demanding more from ourselves? Aren't we supposed to be *tightening* the reins on the yetzer hara, the evil impulse? After all, this is *Yom HaDin* -- the Day of Judgment -- isn't "loosen up" a rather odd message for Rosh Hashanah?

To be clear, I'm not talking about self-indulgence or abandoning discipline. Discipline -- physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual discipline -- is essential. It keeps us civilized, it keeps us honest, it keeps us from hurting each other, and it can carry us through difficult times. Indeed I have spoken of the importance of discipline on many a Yamim Noraim, and I doubtless will again.

But I want to suggest that there is a paradox at the heart of the story, and at the heart of teshuvah. Do you remember what the Baal Shem says to Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef to get him to listen? "Anger," he says, "is something one must learn to control." And then he tells a story about loosening the reins!

Of course we have an obligation to manage our yetzer hara, the evil impulse, the dark side we all have. Anger, impatience, laziness, greed, manipulation, hurtful words, hurtful behavior -- insert your favorite sin here -- are indeed things one must learn to control. Paradoxically, however, it seems that the best way to learn to control, or manage, the yetzer hara, is to loosen the reins that stifle the soul.

When the soul is weak, the yetzer hara grows in force and power. When the soul is silenced, the yetzer hara makes itself heard loud and clear. But when the soul is ascendant and strong, when it vibrates and sings, the yetzer becomes less important, easier to manage, *it* loosens *its* hold. In other words, the best way to deal with the yetzer hara, is to set free the yetzer hatov.

Which brings to mind another story. Actually, it's the same story, only the characters and the plot are totally different, and this one was told by Rabbi Simḥa Bunem of Pshishkhe:

A parable: A prince bought a pure-bred stallion, and to protect him from thieves, locked him into a stable built of stone. Its gate was bolted and guarded by an armed watchman. One night when he could not fall asleep, the prince went for a walk. He passed in front of the stable and thought that the watchman was looking perplexed.

"Hey," he called to him, "what's on your mind?"

"There is this question that is bothering me: when you sink a nail into the wall, where does the mortar go?"

8. See Berakhot 32b; Zohar I, 132a-b; Zohar III, 20a.

“An important question,” said the prince. “You do well to think about it.” And he went home and back to bed. An hour later he still could not fall asleep. So he went down again, out to the yard and the watchman, who sat there with his head propped in his hands, meditating.

“What now,” said the prince, “what are you thinking about now?”

“Well, you see, it’s like this: when you eat a bagel, what happens to the hole?”

“A profound question,” said the prince. “You do well to concern yourself with it.” And he went back to his quarters. He came down a third time, and for the third time the watchman seemed in a quandary.

“Another question?” asked the prince. “Yes — and this is it: I tell myself that the stable is here, the walls are here and I am here — but the stallion, where in the world is he?”⁹

The watchman has only one duty: to guard and protect the stallion. Somehow he fails -- the stallion is gone and the story doesn’t tell us how or why. What went wrong?

Here’s what I think. You can’t protect a pure-bred stallion by locking him in a stone stable; a pure-bred stallion needs to run. The watchman knew the risks of letting the stallion out into the field. After all, a lot can happen to a stallion in this world. But he never focused on the risk of keeping a stallion locked up: that it would wither, that its grand powerful muscles would shrink to nothing, that it would die or simply disappear.

As I read this story (and there are many ways of reading it, as with all stories -- I invite you to take a copy home, discuss them over lunch, and interpret them yourself) we are, each of us, the watchman, and the stallion is our soul -- noble, strong, pure-bred. The stallion is our heart, our passion, our real power, our capacity to love and give and grow, our yearning for the good and the holy. The stallion is our truest self -- our essence. It is our life-force, our mission. And we have only one real duty: to guard and protect it.

We’ve spoken of a paradox in the first story, a paradox of teshuvah: loosening up can actually helps us gain control. Here we have another, related paradox. Paradoxically, the only way to protect our soul is to put it at risk.

The two stories are really one story. The first step in teshuvah, in returning to God, is letting go, letting go of the things that keep us out of touch with our soul. The first story focused on excess judgment -- in Hebrew *din*; it focuses on the dangers to the soul when, in our desire for control, we keep the reins too tight. This story speaks of closing off the soul for a different reason: because we are vulnerable.

We all experience moments when we’re tempted to protect our hearts and souls the way the watchman tried to protect the stallion. After all, a lot can happen to a soul in this world. It’s risky to love -- we get hurt, our love is unrequited, our beloved dies. It’s risky to be real -- to reveal how vulnerable we are, how much shame we carry, how easily we’re hurt, how inadequate and frightened and alone we sometimes feel. And stone walls -- keeping at a distance, staying in our comfort zone, being who we’ve always been, not needing too much, not loving too much, not feeling too much -- give us the illusion of safety.

But it is an illusion. While we’re sitting there guarding the door, protecting ourselves so well, that which we care about most -- the potential to fulfill our dreams, the opportunity to love and be loved, to be touched and transformed, to change the world, the core of who we are, is slipping

9. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 224–25.

away unnoticed. Just as a stallion needs to run, so a soul needs to grow and evolve, to connect to other souls, to aspire and ascend, to make a difference in the world, to fulfill its mission.

So yes, it's risky to ask the deep questions at the core of our being -- questions about what really motivates us, what gives life meaning -- to follow our dreams, to have the courage of our convictions, to live our values. We might fail, we might feel foolish, we might have to make uncomfortable changes and difficult sacrifices. But it's riskier not to.

It's risky to let the stallion run free. If we do, we might see how strong and powerful, beautiful and noble it really is, and then we will no longer be able, in good conscience, to lock it away. Similarly, it's risky to get to know our own souls, to take seriously that we have a soul, that our soul yearns for God, and -- that God yearns for us too. But again, it's riskier not to.

Teshuvah, as we've said, means not only repentance, turning, and returning, but also responding, answering. We've spoken of the watchman and the stallion in the story, but who is the prince? Most likely, the prince is God -- or, rather, the spark of God in each of us. God, who has entrusted into our care a soul, a mission, a purpose. God -- awake all night, passing by, checking in, asking -- what are you thinking about? Or, as the question was posed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, ayeka, where are you?

Today is Yom HaDin Rosh Hashanah. The prince -- God without and God within -- is walking by, asking -- what are you thinking about now? Ayeka? How do we respond? Given that we're Jews, I trust that God will be neither surprised nor disappointed if, like the watchman, we answer the question with more questions. But not just any question. Now is the time to stop distracting ourselves with meaningless questions -- however grandiose and profound they may sound. So much of what we focus on is like wondering about the hole in the bagel! Now is the time to ask the questions that matter:

- What are my core values? How much of my time and energy is spent in the service of those values?
- Who do I love? How much of my time and energy is spent being present to them?
- What is my passion?
- What does my soul long for?
- What do I need to change this year to better meet those longings?
- Where and what is my essence? Is it charging down a beach, through a forest, across a field? Or is it languishing in a stone vault, seemingly safe, all the while slipping away year by year, day by day, moment by moment, until the stable becomes a tomb?
- What does it mean to be granted another year of life? And what will I do with it?
- What does God ask of me?

How do we respond? By loosening the reins, and letting our souls vibrate. We respond by singing the soul's song.

ROSH HASHANAH #3

Rabbi Yerahmiel [the eldest son of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Pshysa (the Yehudi)], was a watchmaker before he became a rabbi. This is a story he once told to the congregation assembled in the Beit Midrash, the House of Study:

“When I had learned the watchmaker’s trade, I lived with my father-in-law, and he too knew quite a bit about watches. Once I wanted to go to a great zaddik and had no money for the journey. Then I told my father-in-law that if he gave me ten gulden, I would repair his watch which had been out of order for a long time, and which he had not been able to repair himself. He agreed. So I took the whole watch apart to see what was wrong with it. And then I saw that there was nothing wrong with it at all, except that one hair spring was the least bit bent. I straightened it out, and the watch was as good and true as when it left the hand of its maker.”

When Rabbi Yerahmiel had ended his story, the entire congregation wept.¹⁰

As I read this story, the watch is us, our soul. When it’s out of order, we must repair it; we must return it to being as good and true as when it left the hand of its maker. That’s what teshuvah (repentance, repair, response, return) is all about.

So why would an entire congregation weep on hearing this story? Well sometimes a story can make what everyone knows in the abstract more concrete; maybe the story hammers home that this is for real, that we all have repair we must do. Or, maybe the story evokes feelings of shame, the realization that sometimes the repair needed is so minor, so small -- it’s only a hair spring -- and we haven’t done it. Or, maybe its a little overwhelming to realize that teshuvah isn’t just about fixing some little part of ourselves; to make even the smallest change, we have to take the whole watch, our whole being, apart.

Why does the watch, the self, have to be taken apart? Well for one thing, although the problem appears on the face of the watch, the broken piece is usually somewhere in the mechanism. So too with us. While the problem manifests in some external way, in behavior or words -- inappropriate or childish reactions, selfishness, unkindness, whatever it is -- the actual brokenness is hidden deep inside.

But not only that. If we’re going to change, we have to take the self apart because a human being is an integrated whole, a system. Our pieces are interconnected -- physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. It’s all part of one whole, and a bent hair spring in one area has a ripple effect throughout the system.

It would be wonderful if we could just fix that one little thing, and leave everything else alone. Like the Rubik’s cube. Remember the Rubik’s cube? You’d get the whole puzzle worked out, except for two little squares that were in the wrong place and had to be reversed. But the challenge was that you couldn’t just take them out and replace them; you had to turn the whole puzzle inside out again. So too with ourselves. Fixing just one little piece of ourselves is an existential impossibility; when one thing shifts, everything shifts.

Now of course, when we do take the watch apart, we never know what we’ll find. Sometimes, as in the story, the problem is as small as a hair spring. Other times there’s a lot of damage -- the whole mechanism may be broken, or rusty.

10. Based on Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2, pp. 233–234.

Other times there's a different kind of problem. Which reminds me of another story:

The wife of a high-ranking officer had told a tailor to make her an expensive dress. But the dress turned out to be too tight and the tailor was thrown out of the house in disgrace. The tailor went to Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn and begged him to tell him what to do so as not to lose all his customers.

The zaddik told him what to do: "Go back and offer to make the dress over. Then rip it up and sew the pieces together again just as they are."

The man did as he was told. Timidly and humbly he made over the dress he had botched in his proud assurance, and it turned out perfect.

This is a story Rabbi Moshe was fond of telling himself.¹¹

This story, too, is about taking apart and putting together; it's about teshuvah. But the dress has to be ripped apart not because of a specific problem with one of the pieces; it's because of how they're put together.

Which raises the question: how are we put together? How do we construct our identities and self-image, our opinions and beliefs, our faith, our sense of other people? Do we do it with arrogance and proud assurance? Or humbly, with a healthy dose of questioning? If like the tailor, we sew ourselves together with proud assurance, then the dress -- the self -- will turn out too tight. It's as though our over-confidence stiffens the fabric, keeps it from stretching, or fills all the gaps, leaving no room for questions, learning, no space to assimilate new information and new realities. But if the pieces of the self are held together with humility, *then* there's room to grow and evolve.

Both stories teach, in different ways, that teshuvah is a process of taking apart and reassembling. The first story speaks of repairing our faults and weaknesses, our identifiable dark sides. The second, about managing our strengths and talents, our good sides: our moral grounding, our native intelligence and our learning, our spiritual gifts and spiritual attainments, and what we think we know. We take ourselves apart when we've done wrong, when we see our yetzer hara (the evil impulse) in operation, when we're ashamed. And we take ourselves apart when we're convinced that we have it all together, when we think we have ourselves or another person or the world figured out, when we're too sure or too proud.

Now, I know I don't have to tell you that sometimes life does the taking apart for us. Some of us sitting here today feel already like the pieces have come apart. It could be a personal crisis, -- a loss of a loved one, or our health, or a job. It could be a communal crisis -- the economy, an act of terrorism. And things fall apart -- our sense of wholeness is shattered.

Other times, it's not something necessarily tragic or shocking that leads us to take ourselves apart. We just arrive at a point in our lives where we know that something doesn't work right, or something doesn't fit right, anymore. And we have to change.

But even when life itself doesn't demand that the self be taken apart, Rosh Hashanah does. Every year, year after year, again and again. Who would do it willingly? Why take apart the self if we don't sense something broken, if the self doesn't feel too tight?

First of all, if we feel so confident that we don't need to take ourselves apart, that's probably the clearest sign that we *do* -- that the pieces are sewn together with proud assurance, and we need to be remade with more humility. If we're honest, and self-aware, there's always something in need of repair, in need of healing. And if we refuse to take ourselves apart and fix it, then next

11. Based on Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2, pp. 162-63.

year we'll find ourselves confessing to the very same sins -- and probably a few new ones -- that we confess to this year. We won't *do* any better, and we won't *be* any better.

Why do it willingly? Because -- to use a metaphor that I know is a bit challenging at this particular moment in time, and deliberately so -- it's a way of making deposits in our spiritual accounts. We may go for years without sensing any need for spiritual resources, without any concern about spiritual bankruptcy.

But as I mentioned, sometimes life does the taking apart for us; it will happen to all of us, at one time or another. Maybe as a result of our own deeds, our own way of living. But often, not because of anything we did; things happen, beyond our control, through no fault of our own, that shatter our sense of who we are, that shatter our worldview or our faith.

And when that happens, when our resources are strained -- when we feel emotionally on empty, when our bodies give out -- the extent to which we have invested wisely in the life of the spirit will have a significant impact on how we fare.

וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצִדְקָה מְעַבְרִין אֶת רֵעַ הַגְּזֵרָה.

But teshuvah, prayer, and deeds of righteousness can ameliorate the severity of the decree.

I don't read this prayer as being about reward or punishment. It's not about some externally imposed reward, not about "merit" in the way we usually think of it, or protecting ourselves from bad things happening. It's about the interest that a healthy spiritual life bears. When we devote ourselves to tzedakah (developing generosity of spirit, a sense of justice and the joy and responsibility of giving), when we develop our relationships with God and community through prayer, and when we are practiced in teshuvah (the art of taking ourselves apart and putting the pieces back together), then when the decree comes -- and it always does -- its effects will be ameliorated, because we will be able to handle it better.

But there's a deeper reason we do this on Rosh Hashanah. In a few moments we will ask again to be inscribed in the book of life, and we will pray Hayom Harat Olam -- today the world is born. Today we are born -- today, each one of us is created anew. The book of life, and our re-birth today -- two of the central themes of Rosh Hashanah. And the two are intimately interconnected.

Life, by definition, is a process of constant re-creation: nothing that is created once and for all, unchanging, that doesn't continually recreate, can be truly called alive. There is a beautiful midrash which teaches that God is constantly creating and destroying worlds. It is a way of saying that all authentic creativity -- life itself -- is a continual cycle of construction and deconstruction, putting together and taking apart and putting together again. To be alive, then, to be inscribed in the book of life, is to sign on to that process.

And not only on Rosh Hashanah -- every day. Every morning we pray, הַמְחִידֵשׁ בְּטוֹבוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם -- God, in God's goodness, renews the work of creation each day, continually. The deconstructive/constructive work we do today is meant to set the pattern for the year, to become a constant in our lives. We're meant to become practiced in it, to embrace it, as part of the art of living.

The alternative is a kind of death in life; we lose our vibrancy, we stagnate. If we don't take apart the watch and fix it, it will keep losing time. So too us. When we won't engage in the creative work of life -- taking ourselves apart and putting ourselves together -- we lose time.

We lose time because we forfeit its benefits -- growth and change, evolution, new life -- and reap only its costs -- deterioration, decay, death. And this is true at any age, no matter how young or old we are.

So far we've been talking about the personal benefits of doing this work. But we do this kind of teshuvah not only because its good for us. We do it because we have a communal responsibility, to each other.

I said earlier that a human being is an integrated whole, a system of interconnected parts. The same is true of humanity as a whole. The character of any collective, any group is a direct function of the character of its individual members. Any group -- family/community/society -- comprised of people who practice the art of taking apart and putting together will itself be capable of taking apart and putting together, of self-reflection, self-repair, and change. It will live, grow, evolve.

But a society comprised of people who can't or won't take themselves apart to fix what's broken, who put the pieces together too confidently, will itself be incapable of fixing itself when it is broken, incapable of self-reflection, self-repair and change. It will be a society that is not evolving but devolving, not living but slowly dying.

What kind of society does this particular brand of cowardice create? One that -- collectively and individually -- looks for the bent hair spring outside rather than inside. It will take apart another person, another group, another nation rather than itself. A society which disdains depth of thought, and values blissful arrogant ignorance. A society in which those who are comfortable and powerful don't have to acknowledge that the pieces are assembled in such a way that the dress is too tight.

To extend the metaphor: it's like those times when you buy something new that requires assembly, and you follow all the directions, and it looks just right, and you feel so proud of yourself. And then you see that there's a piece that you've left out. If we're not practiced in taking apart and putting together -- if we're too frightened or too proud to rip the seams of the dress -- then we'd rather just throw the piece away and pretend we never saw it. If what we've excluded is a washer from a toy, so what? But what if the excluded piece is the poor, or people of color, or women, or gays and lesbians, or immigrants, or the disabled, or Muslims, or -- give it time and it will certainly come back to this: Jews. It's so much easier to fault the excluded piece, or just discard it, than to have to disassemble the whole system and put it back in such a way that all the pieces -- all people -- have a place, and the garment is big enough to fit everyone.

I must say that when I look at the larger society in which we live, I see a nation comprised largely of people who have lost the courage to take ourselves apart -- who no longer see the need for it -- and it frightens me. Obviously, none of us alone can reverse that trend -- but there are things we can do.

We can work in the world. We can work to fix the political process so that it nurtures individuals who themselves have this courage and this capacity -- leaders, not politicians. We can support programs and organizations -- Jewish or not -- which try to address societal problems in a deep way. And more than that, we can work on ourselves. We can become people and a community well practiced in the art of constant re-creation, of continual teshuvah, people and a community who support each other in doing that work.

Israel, I think is stronger in this area -- it's one of the things that most energizes me when I go there, and that makes me most proud of being a Jew. Not that there isn't significant brokenness

within Israeli society, there is. Nevertheless, without romanticizing anything, I think in Israel there is a significant commitment to this kind of work, and great courage in doing it.

And I daresay that Israel's strength in this regard is directly rooted in the Torah and Jewish thought precisely on this issue. The stories of the watch and the dress perfectly capture a magnificent tension at the heart of Judaism: the tension of striving to discern and fulfill the Divine will, knowing all the while that all our attempts are flawed, limited, broken, provisional. These stories of taking apart are also about the profound humility with which we purport to speak of God and God's will. They speak to the way we read and understand Torah.

We are a people of revelation, and we have a text. The Torah is the Torah, we don't change or remove a word. We don't throw out any of pieces. But neither do we read that text, or life, or a human being, in only one way. We don't throw any of the pieces out, but we do continually take them apart and sew them together anew -- interpreting in new ways -- and always, always with humility. Because ultimately, it is only through the humility of taking apart and reconstructing that we can have any kind of faith, that we can, so to speak, draw near to God.

The prophet Isaiah (57:15) teaches that God dwells with the lowly and humble of spirit. But of the arrogant, the Talmud teaches that God says, "There is not enough room in the world for Myself and him" (Sotah 5a).¹² In our proud assurance of what we think we know and understand, we become the tailor who makes the dress too tight -- not only for us, but for God.

Whenever the pieces are sewn together with arrogance -- whether they be the pieces of our faith, our practice, our understanding of Torah, our sense of what God wants from us, or the pieces of our understanding of another person, of ourselves -- whenever we are afraid or unwilling to take those pieces apart, fix what's broken, and put them back together with humility -- we, as it were, banish God from our world.

Hayom Harat Olam. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, the world, and we are born. Or translated differently, today the world, and we, tremble. And we blow the shofar. The pattern is always the same: a tekiah, a whole note -- then either a shevarim or teruah, broken notes -- and then a whole note, tekiah, again. Whole, broken, whole -- we start all of a piece, we take ourselves apart, and then put it all back together again. This is the process of repair, of return, of teshuvah. The shofar blasts are meant to move us into brokenness -- the brokenness we experience, and the brokenness we have caused -- broken hearts, broken relationships, broken promises, shattered hopes, shattered dreams. The shofar is intended to help us stop pretending to be just fine when inside we are broken, lost and lonely, anxious and afraid, flawed, embarrassed, ashamed, wounded, hungry, insecure and ill at ease. Or, if we are complacent -- if we think everything is just fine, if we're proudly assured and too comfortable -- the shofar is meant to shatter that complacency, to move us out of our cockiness into a more honest, more humble sense of who we really are.

The stakes are high -- personally, and communally. And the brokenness is really hard. It hurts, and sometimes it's really scary. But whether in any given moment we choose to take ourselves apart, or life does it for us, the message of the shofar and these stories is clear -- it is through that brokenness, and only through that brokenness, that we will emerge whole.

12. Sotah 5a:

Rav H̄isda said (or some say Mar Ukba): Of one who has an arrogant spirit, the Holy Blessed One declares, "There is not enough room in the world for Myself and him"

אמר רב חסדא, ואיתימא מר עוקבא: כל אדם שיש בו גסות הרוח - אמר הקב"ה: אין אני והוא יכולין לדור בעולם.

YOM KIPPUR #1

Shanah tovah. Throughout these Yamim Noraim, I have been telling ḥasidic tales. Stories of rebbes and rebels, of very ordinary but quite extraordinary people, of the righteous (the *tzaddikim*) and the less than fully righteous. Through these stories, we have been travelling back in time to the early days of ḥasidism, a populist, Jewish renewal movement which emerged in eastern Europe in the early 18th century, under the inspirational leadership of Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov.

Naturally, though, ḥasidism was not without its opponents and its skeptics. Here's the story of someone who started out as such a skeptic:

Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal, later the maggid of Zlotchov, did, indeed, seek out the Baal Shem while he was quite young, but was not sure whether or not he should become his disciple. Then the zaddik took him with him on a journey to a certain place. When they had been driving for a while, it became evident that they were not on the right road.

"Why, rabbi!" said Mikhal. "Don't you know the way?"
"It will make itself known to me in due time," answered the Baal Shem, and they took another road; but this too did not take them to their destination.

"Why, rabbi!" said Mikhal. "Have you lost your way?"
"It is written in the Psalms," the Baal Shem said calmly, "that God 'will fulfill the desire of those who fear God (רְצוֹן יִרְאֵי יְעֹשֶׂה) (Psalm 145:19).' And so God has fulfilled your desire to have a chance to laugh at me."

These words pierced young Mikhal to the heart and without further arguing or analyzing, he joined the master with his whole soul.¹³

I don't think it's that hard to understand, and even sympathize with, the young Mikhal's secret desire to have a laugh at the Baal Shem's expense. After all, the Baal Shem was shaking up the Jewish world, changing everything, and getting a lot of attention. And Mikhal -- well, I suspect that he felt a little competitive, envious of the Baal Shem's success and growing reknown, and probably also threatened by the Baal Shem's new ways of doing things. So while on one level he was intrigued, and perhaps genuinely attracted to what the Baal Shem was offering, what he really wanted was to expose him as all show: a charismatic celebrity with no substance.

If we're honest with ourselves, I suspect most of us can relate to the young Mikhal in some way. Nearly all of us have had similar desires about someone we envy or feel competitive with, or someone who threatens our position or self-image. Secretly, we would be delighted to see that person trip up, be embarrassed, or fail. It could be someone who is more successful than we are, someone who achieves what we're working toward before we do. It could be someone we perceive as smarter, or more popular, than ourselves, someone who gets more attention or accolades, or makes more money. Maybe there's someone whose goodness or generosity, or whose moral stance, makes us uneasy or ashamed; we'd love to find out that they're not for real, to see them exposed as fraudulent. Or conversely, it could be someone who seems to get away with being irresponsible, unethical, or who has actually hurt us; we may secretly long to see them finally pay the price and get their due. Almost all of us, at one time or another, have harbored the desire to be vindicated, to be proven right, or to feel superior, at someone else's expense.

13. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, p. 61.

And like our young Mikhal, most of us are savvy enough to package it pretty well, to mask it in something socially acceptable. Have we ever heard ourselves say, "It's not that I wish so-and-so any harm, I just think it's important that the record be accurate"? How often have we witnessed a hand go up in some public forum -- a lecture, a class, a meeting -- to ask a "question" whose primary purpose is not to elicit information, but to embarrass someone, or to demonstrate some form of superiority? How often has that hand been our own? And of course, none of us has ever asked a friend or colleague, "what do you think of so-and-so," just waiting to hear something critical, or embarrassing. So our story is a cautionary tale about owning up to and working on those base, ignoble desires that we secretly harbor.

But if that's the only meaning of the story, we have a problem. Remember the verse that the Baal Shem quotes to Mikhal, from Psalm 145? "God will fulfill the desire of those who fear God." Our competitive, envious young Mikhal isn't normally what we think of as a "God fearing" person, and we don't generally think of God granting such a base desire as to have a laugh at another's expense. So what did young Mikhal, later Rabbi Mikhal, really want? What desire did God grant?

I want to suggest that the story actually points to three levels of desire, and that it is the third that is most important.

The first level is the surface packaging: Mikhal was investigating, he wanted to find out whether to become a *hasid* of the Baal Shem Tov. And that, we've seen, turned out to be a cover for a deeper desire. The second level of desire, what Mikhal really wanted, was to reveal the Baal Shem as a fraud, to feel superior. But it turns out that too was a cover, for an even deeper desire. The third level of his desire -- what Rabbi Mikhal *really* wanted -- was to have his pettiness exposed. He did indeed desire a laugh at the Baal Shem's expense, but even more than that, he longed to be called on it. To be seen through, to be known.

Why would he want that? Earlier this evening we read the beautiful poem by Merle Feld:¹⁴

I am grateful for this,
a moment of truth,
grateful to stand before You
in judgment.
 You know me as a liar
 and I am flooded with relief
 to have my darkest self
 exposed at last.

It is a relief to be honest and to be exposed, embarrassing as it is, ridiculous as it makes us feel. Why?

Because being known is a fundamental human need. It's an emotional need, and the basis of all true intimacy. But it's also a spiritual need. Young Mikhal didn't want to be seen through for no particular reason; he wanted to be confronted *so that* he could grow, so that he could become a better person, so that he could learn.

14. The complete poem is found on page 33.

Later in his life, Rabbi Yeḥiel Mikhal would become a rebbe in his own right, and he would teach a similar lesson. He said:

The Evil Urge says to a person secretly, וַיֹּאמֶר נִסְעָה וְנִלְכָּה וְאֵלֵכָה לְגַגְדֶּךָ, “Let us journey, let us go, and I will go before you [lit. against you].”¹⁵ And that is the Yetzer Hara’s secret request to the person he is trying to seduce: “Let us leave this disgraceful state and serve the Creator, so that I too may go and ascend with you rung by rung, although I seem to oppose, to disturb, and hinder you.” For the Evil Urge is meant to become good, and it *wants* to become good, by driving the person to overcome it, and to *make* it good.¹⁶

We all have a dark side, a yetzer hara, an evil urge. It expresses itself as all sorts of base desires; it seduces us into believing that we want this, we want that. And what Rabbi Mikhal learned (and taught), is that even while we experience ourselves wanting things that aren’t good for us, even while we have base desires, when our ego needs are raging -- if we probe deeper, we discover that what we really want is to confront and channel those base desires, to master them, to elevate them. At the very moment when we think we want to do something wrong, when we want something we are (or should be) embarrassed to want, at that very same moment, some part of us also wants not to yield to that desire, but to transform it. In other words, the deepest, truest, best part of us *wants* to do teshuvah.

That, really, is why, in the right context, by the right people, in the right way, we want to be seen through. It helps us grow, and pushes us to change. Once our cover is blown and our less noble desires are visible, once someone says, “oh come on” and names for us what’s really going on -- once we articulate it ourselves -- it becomes increasingly difficult to keep acting on those ignoble, base desires. We tap in to the inherent desire we all have to do better, the yetzer hara’s longing to be healed and elevated. And that longing to do better starts to nudge us, to make us uneasy, to keep us up at night, or to appear in our dreams. That’s what we call *hirhurei teshuvah* -- intimations of teshuvah, the yearning to return, to repent, to repair -- and that’s where true change begins.

In the right context, by the right people, in the right way, we want to be seen through. And actually, the yetzer hara -- the evil impulse -- is remarkably good at creating the right context and finding the right people. We know that the yetzer hara hides itself -- that it takes cover in all kinds of seemingly well-intentioned, appropriate desires, wants and impulses. But it turns out that the yetzer hara isn’t just hiding, but playing hide and seek. And often, it isn’t even hidden all that well. With some frequency the yetzer hara hides itself in -- even creates -- precisely those circumstances in which it is most likely to be unmasked. In other words, our dark side leads us to just the right situations, and just the right people, who can help us heal and grow.

Let’s go back to the story. Remember Mikhal’s surface desire: what he *said* was that he wanted to see if the Baal Shem should be his teacher. If he was being honest, he wasn’t just investigating; he really wanted to be able to dismiss the Baal Shem as a fraud. But it turned out that in fact he really did want a teacher, just not in the way he thought. And he was led to find exactly what he really wanted, that he didn’t think he wanted -- a rebbe.

So often, while we’re busy pursuing all kinds of things we think we desire, we find precisely the learning and healing we really desire, and that we need. Provided, that is, that we’re open to it. Sometimes it happens when our desires are frustrated and disappointed -- when the path we choose is blocked, whenever we don’t get our way or what we think we want. That is the time to

15. Gen. 33:12, Esav speaking to Yaakov.

16. after Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, p. 145.

look deeply at our desires. Do we really want what we say we want? Or is this a cover for the yetzer hara, some less noble desire. And if so, do we really want to satisfy that darker desire, or, do we want to do better, rise higher?

I'll give you some examples.

- I went after a particular job, or promotion, and I didn't get it. Perhaps my desire for that job was denied. Or, perhaps my deeper desire -- to confront my ambition, to re-align my values, was granted.
- I planned a magnificent bar/bat mitzvah party, or wedding, but in the end it felt kind of empty. Was my desire for the be-all-end-all affair denied? Or was my deeper desire -- to wrestle with my need to show off and be the center of attention, to learn to recognize and experience true blessing -- granted?
- I try so hard to please people that I care about, but they don't appreciate me the way I'd hoped. Are my desires being denied? Or are my deeper yearnings -- to be pushed to trust myself, to be challenged to stop needing others' approval -- being granted?

And of course, these are just examples; we can each come up with our own.

Perhaps we can find an example of this even in connection with our expectations coming here tonight. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, I'm sure that at some point during this day, each and every one of us will be (or may already have been) disappointed or angry because of something we think we want: some part of the service that is done differently or that is omitted, not sitting where we want, not having the honor we want, something or someone who annoys offends or angers us, or something we think is just wrong.

That kind of disappointment or anger, the judgment and critique, is one of the favorite hiding places of the yetzer hara. And therefore, it's actually a wonderful spiritual opportunity. It's a wonderful opportunity to expose the yetzer hara, and to reveal the hidden agendas that many of us harbor, even now when we claim ostensibly to be worshipping God:

- wanting to be right, or to be more knowledgeable or serious than other people;
- wanting to feel like an insider;
- our desire to justify our decision not to come more often, or to keep a distance and not get too involved when we do come;
- wanting to be angry;
- our desire to have a laugh at the Jewish tradition, or maybe even to have a laugh at me.

Whatever it is that pushes our buttons in the service, perhaps that's precisely the place within us that hungers to be exposed and challenged, so that it can be elevated. Perhaps that disappointment or irritant is an arrow, pointing to the yetzer hara's hiding place, and also to its desire -- our desire -- to rise above it or let it go, to be a little nobler, a little more generous of spirit, to be healed.

What do we really want? It's not so easy to know. The longer it's been since we looked for the yetzer hara, the better hidden he is. It takes work, it takes practice, it takes some discipline to become better attuned both to its seductions, and to its deeper desire for healing.

And it takes courage. It's embarrassing to have our dark side revealed, to be seen honestly, to see ourselves honestly. It can also be really painful, because the yetzer hara most frequently takes root in the places where in the past we have been hurt -- moments when we were shamed, when we felt unloved or unlovable. And who wants to revisit that?

And sadly, in reality, it's not always safe. Like young Mikhal, we want to be seen through, but not just by just anyone. None of us wants our dark side exposed to people we don't trust,

people who don't have our interests at heart, people who will take advantage of us, or who will hurt us. Paradoxically, therefore, for many of us the thing we want most of all -- being seen clearly, being found out -- is also the thing we fear most. Like the yetzer hara itself, we too spend a lot of our lives playing hide and go seek -- desperately wanting to be found, all the while perfecting the art of hiding.

And in a very real way, the purpose of Judaism is to help us be found. The Torah, the prayer book, Shabbat and all the Holy Days, indeed the whole system of mitzvot, ethical and ritual, are there as mirrors, reflecting back to us who we are, and who we long to be. They're there to confront us and challenge us, and sometimes yes, even embarrass us. They keep reconnecting us, every day, with our deepest truest desire: to rise higher, step by step, level by level. Judaism in all its forms and observance is there as a constant reminder that in fact we *are* known, seen through. It is a reminder that in truth, we stand before God naked, without disguise, fully exposed, all the time -- not only on Yom Kippur, but every moment, every day. And every time we acknowledge that to ourselves -- each time we again become aware of it -- it is a challenge and a burden, but also a relief, an opening, a possibility for healing.

We'll close with one more story:

Rabbi Barukh's grandson was once playing hide-and-seek with another boy. He hid himself well and waited for his playmate to find him. When he had waited for a long time, he came out of his hiding-place, but the other was nowhere to be seen. Now the boy realized that his friend had not looked for him from the very beginning. This made him cry, and crying he ran to his grandfather and complained of his faithless friend. Then tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh's eyes and he said: "God says the same thing: 'I hide, but no one wants to seek me.'"¹⁷

God too plays hide and seek. God is "hidden" everywhere in the world, most especially, in each one of us. That deepest of desires we've been talking about -- the fundamental human need to grow and evolve, to strive and ascend, to surpass who we have been, to be kinder, more generous; to make a greater effort; to heal ourselves, to heal others, to heal the world -- that is God in hiding. Now is the time to start seeking, and in so doing, be found.

On this day, this one day,
I stand before You naked,
without disguise, without
embellishment, naked,
shivering, ridiculous.
I implore You --
let me try again.

17. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, p. 97.

YOM KIPPUR #2

Shanah tovah. This morning I want to tell you two stories. The first is a story about Zusia, one of the most picturesque of the Hasidic rebbes. Known for being especially happy despite enduring great hardship and suffering, and affectionately remembered as the "Fool of God," he often spoke of himself in the third person:

In an inn somewhere, a wealthy guest mistakes Reb Zusia for a beggar and treats him accordingly. Later he learns his identity and comes to cry his remorse:

"Forgive me, Rebbe, you must -- for I didn't know!"

"Why do you ask Zusia to forgive you?" Rebbe Zusia said, shaking his head and smiling. "You haven't done anything bad to him; it is not Zusia you insulted but a poor beggar, so go and ask the beggars, everywhere, to forgive you."¹⁸

The second is a story told by Rabbi Yitzhak of Vorki:

Once when I was on the road with my holy teacher Rabbi David of Lelov, and we stopped over in a town far from our home, a woman suddenly fell upon him in the street and began to beat him. She thought he was her husband who had abandoned her many years ago. After a few moments, she saw her error and burst into a flood of tears.

"Stop crying," Rabbi David said to her. "You were not striking me, but your husband." And he added in a low tone: "How often we strike someone because we take him for another!"¹⁹

Two stories of mistaken identity: Reb Zusia is mistaken for a beggar, Rabbi David for a stranger's husband. But the stories speak, of course, to a deeper kind of mistaken identity.

Last night we spoke about how much we all want to be known, to be seen. This morning I want to talk about how hard it is to really see another person, and how rarely we do it.

Let's start with the first story, about Reb Zusia. This story reminds us of how often we see only the surface, how superficial we are when we look at each other. We respond to the packaging -- to how someone is dressed, to their title or position, to their social skills or affability, to their class; rarely do we look beneath the surface if the external package isn't appealing.

The second story, about Rabbi David, points to a different cause of mistaken identity. Indeed, Rabbi David -- who died 43 years before Freud was born -- seems already to have understood the concepts of transference and projection. We respond to people based on patterns of past relationships, on associations they evoke with formative figures in our lives. Or, we see other people through "self-colored" glasses -- through the prism of our own experiences, emotions, thoughts, motivations, and values. We know how we would react or think or feel, what would be motivating *us* if we behaved that way -- and without even being aware of it, we assume the same of another person.

Taken together, the two stories point to the inevitability of mistaken identity. We human beings have a limited capacity to perceive and to know. We see only the smallest fraction of the reality that surrounds us -- truly the tip of the iceberg -- and we see only the smallest fraction of another human being. Even regarding the people we know best and love most in the world, still, the majority of that person's history, thoughts, feelings we will never know. All the more so with

18. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 126.

19. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2, p. 186.

casual acquaintances, business associates, strangers on the street! And of course, we have limited time and emotional energy; even if it were possible to fully know another human being, with how many people could we do that? So we make judgments and assumptions based on patterns and people we've encountered in the past, we fill in the gaps with our imaginations, for good or for bad.

Nevertheless, while mistaken identity -- our failure to really see each other -- is fully human, and to some degree inevitable, the two stories also remind us of the pain it can cause. How often we strike each other -- verbally, emotionally, spiritually -- in our failure to really see each other! How often do we cause deep and lasting hurts by our assumptions and judgments, or by our indifference. By our harshness, or by our impatience. How often we cause each other pain because we don't make the effort to really know each other, to look beneath the surface packaging, and to see who another person really is -- because we can't get our own preconceptions out of the way.

But these two stories also speak to a much deeper level of mistaken identity. What is the real case of mistaken identity involving Reb Zusia, and what is the wealthy hotel guest's real sin? It's not that he mistook the great Reb Zusia for a beggar. The real mistaken identity is that he mistook a so-called beggar for someone he didn't need to treat with dignity and care. He mistook a human being for something less than a human being. It's not that he didn't recognize Reb Zusia; it's that he didn't recognize the image of God in the face of the person he saw as a mere beggar.

We do it all the time -- in dramatic and subtle ways, with strangers on the street and with people we think we know well. How often we strike someone, Rabbi David said quietly, because we take him for another. How often we strike someone -- hurt someone, mistreat someone, ignore someone, judge someone, because we see only that person's negative traits:

- we see the selfishness and pettiness
- we see the immaturity and hypocrisy
- we see the stinginess the arrogance, the competitiveness --
- we we see whatever it is that makes us judge or dismiss that person.

We see all that negatively, but we don't look closely enough, work hard enough, dig deep enough, to *also* see that the other is made in the image of God.

Any time we look at another person -- no matter what they've done, good or bad, no matter how they look, no matter whether they seem to have it all together or be a complete mess -- and we're unable to see a fellow human being, flawed like ourselves, struggling to do the best we can in trying circumstances, struggling to find our way through life with imperfect information, struggling with our own particular strengths and weaknesses -- we have a case of mistaken identity.

Now of course, that's much easier said than done. And even if we could do it, if we *did* truly see the image of God in each person, would that put an end to the problem of mistaken identity? Would we stop jumping to conclusions? Would we stop transferring old patterns onto new relationships? Would we take off our self-colored glasses? I doubt it. But we would at least be aware that we're wearing them. We would at least *know* that being in the image of God, the person we see is -- like God -- a mystery, never fully knowable. And maybe we'd pause before jumping to all kinds of conclusions about who that person is. We would at least *know* that being in the image of God, the person we see is -- like ourselves -- absolutely unique in this world. And maybe we'd have a little humility before assuming all the ways in which that person is exactly like us. Maybe we'd be a little more likely to treat beggars as rebbes, rather than to treat rebbes like beggars. We'd still see only the tip of the iceberg, but maybe a little more of that tip,

not only because our vision would improve, but because other people might be able to reveal more of who they are.

Which brings us back to last night's story. Remember Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal, who in his youth *said* he wanted to investigate whether to become a disciple of the Baal Shem, but secretly wanted to expose the Baal Shem as a fraud and laugh at him? In that story, the Baal Shem Tov really *saw* the young Mikhal. He saw through the surface to the hidden agenda, the yetzer hara, but he also saw through *that*, to the yetzer hatov, to the impulse to do better, to do good -- he saw deep inside to the spark of God.

We spoke last night about how much we long to be seen like that, to be known deeply. And sometimes it seems that the only one before whom we can be completely honest, completely exposed is God. That's one of the reasons why it's such a relief to be able to let down our defenses, to confess to God on Yom Kippur.

But I'm going to say something now that may sound blasphemous, even though it isn't: God is not enough. We need to be seen by each other. We need human mirrors, people to reflect our reality back to us, good and bad. If we learn anything at all on these Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe) about the process of teshuvah (repentance, return, response), we learn that we can't do it alone. We need each other, we need a community.

But it has to be a particular kind of community. We need to be around people with whom we can be real, with whom we can be safe, with whom we can reveal our shadow side and own up to all those hidden agendas and less than noble desires. We need people who love us enough to tell us the truth when we're off base, but in a way we can hear it -- with compassion and love, not judgment or anger. We need people who can find us -- and help us find ourselves -- when we get lost in all the packaging. We need people who will let us try out a new way of being. People who see the good in us when we see only failures and limits, who see our strength when we feel weak, who point to our courage when we feel afraid or ashamed.

One time, the Yehudi was asked by his teacher if he had any worthwhile young students with him. "Mendel," he replied, "wants to be worthwhile." Many years later, when [Mendel, who became the Kotzker rebbe] was old, he quoted this question and answer. "At that time," he added, "I did not yet want to be worthwhile. But from the moment the holy Yehudi said it, I did, and I do."²⁰

We all need that -- someone to tell us how much we want to be worthwhile, even before we actually do. Someone to identify our potential and give us a little push. Someone who has faith in us even if we don't have much faith in ourselves. We need people to challenge us and cheer us on; people who will call our bluff and call us on the carpet and then call to see how we are.

So today, on Yom Kippur, we all need to commit to becoming those people. We need to commit to becoming people who see that beneath the bravado, we're all doing our best with what we've got, carrying our own particular pain and vulnerability, insecurity and anxiety, our own tzuris and our own mishegos, most of which no one knows. People who see that underneath all that mishegos, we all want to do better. We need to commit to becoming people before whom others can risk exposing their frailties, their failings, their darker sides. People who can be trusted, people who treat others' vulnerabilities with care and concern, people who help each other grow, people who see beneath the surface. Yes to the hidden agendas and unspoken motives, and then beneath *that*: to the spark of God, the image of God in each person. How often we strike someone because we mistake him or her for another!

20. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 2, p. 271.

How often we strike someone because we don't see deeply enough, because we don't see with enough love. How often we cause each other pain, because we haven't yet become people who see each other's pain, because we haven't yet become people who see each other's potential.

Can each of us do this in a deep way for everyone? Probably not. But we can all be there in that way for someone, and we can all do better, with everyone.

There is a phrase in rabbinic literature that relates to this. It's from the Mishnah Pirkei Avot 1:6: **לְכַף זְכוּת**, וְהָיִי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת, "Make it a practice to judge every person on the scale of merit."

On the simplest level, it's about developing the habit of seeing the best in people, not the worst. There are several stories in the Talmud interpreting this phrase, stories in which one rabbi or another is seen engaging in behavior that looks really bad, but turns out to be completely innocent. We've all had experiences like that, where we see ambiguous behavior by another person (and *everything* we see is ambiguous, we *never* know the full and complete meaning of anything), and we jump to a verdict of guilty, assuming the worst-case scenario, the worst motives. To judge **לְכַף זְכוּת** (on the side of merit) means to do the opposite; to actively look for the best possible explanation and choose to believe that.

It is a powerful phrase -- **דָן לְכַף זְכוּת** -- one worth memorizing. And practicing it is a very powerful exercise. The next time you find yourself assuming the worst of someone, come up with another scenario to justify the behavior. Consciously say to yourself, "maybe this was going on, or maybe that happened" -- even if seems farfetched. You'll be amazed at the impact it has on your thinking.

But to judge **לְכַף זְכוּת** means so much more. It means everything we've been talking about. It means being someone with whom other people can be real, without fear. It means being someone who sees the potential for change, who sees the desire for change, the desire to do teshuvah, in everyone. It means being someone who never sees a human being, without seeing also the image of God.

I said earlier that it's not enough to be seen and known by God -- we need to be seen by each other. Let me refine that a little. When we are truly seen and known by another person, that *is* being seen by God -- by the Divine spark in each of us. That's why it's such a relief, and why it can be so deeply healing, when we do that for each other. When we see deeply, and judge **לְכַף זְכוּת**, we do more than mirror and reflect, we effect a unification: the Divine spark in me joins to the Divine spark in you, and both of us are elevated.

We'll close with another story about mistaken identity, about the same Rabbi David, and about our friend Zusia's younger brother, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk:

For six years and then for another six years, Rabbi David of Lelov had done great penance: he had fasted from one Shabbat to the next, and subjected himself to all manner of rigid discipline. But even when the second six years were up, he felt that he had not reached perfection and did not know how to attain what he still lacked. Since he had heard of Rabbi Elimelekh, the healer of souls, he journeyed to him to ask his help. On Shabbat evening, he came before the tzaddik with many others. The master shook hands with everyone except Rabbi David, but from him he turned and did not give him a glance. The rabbi of Lelov

was appalled and left. But then he thought it over and decided that the master must have taken him for someone else. So he approached him in the evening, after the prayer, and held out his hand. But he was treated just as before. He wept all night and in the morning resolved not to enter the tzaddik's House of Prayer again, but to leave for home at the end of Shabbat. And yet -- when the hour of the holy third meal had come, the meal at which Rabbi Elimelekh spoke words of teaching, he could not restrain himself and crept up to the window. There he heard the rabbi say:

"Sometimes people come to me who fast and torment themselves, and many a one does penance for six years and then for another six -- twelve whole years! And after that, they consider themselves worthy of the holy spirit, and come and ask me to draw it down to them: I am to supply the little they still lack. But the truth of the matter is that all their discipline and all their pains are less than a drop in the sea, and what's more: all that service of theirs does not rise to God, but to the idol of their pride. Such people must turn to God by turning utterly from all they have been doing, and begin to serve from the bottom up and with a truthful heart."

When Rabbi David heard these words, the spirit moved him with such force, that he almost lost consciousness. Trembling and sobbing, he stood at the window. When Havdalah was concluded, he went to the door with faltering breath, opened it in great fear, and waited on the threshold. Rabbi Elimelekh rose from his chair, ran up to his motionless visitor, embraced him and said: "Blessed be he that comes!" Then he drew him toward the table and seated him at his side.

But now Eleazar, the tzaddik's son, could no longer restrain his amazement. "Father," he said, "why, that is the man you turned away twice because you could not endure the mere sight of him!"

"No, indeed!" Rabbi Elimelekh answered. "That was an entirely different person! Don't you see that this is our dear Rabbi David!"²¹

21. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, pp. 255-56.

YOM KIPPUR #3

Throughout Yom Kippur, we have been telling stories that have to do with seeing: how we wish to be seen by others, and how we see others. This evening I want to tell you about someone known for his vision. His name was Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, better known as the Holy Seer of Lublin. He was nearly blind. Elie Wiesel describes him as follows:

His strange eyes, one different from the other -- the right very large, the left almost invisible -- reputedly could see "from one end of the world to the other," and had the power to scan the stifling depths of the soul. One glance at a person would tell him whether he was a descendant of Cain or Abel. This gift of vision he considered a burden; that is what he stated in public. He did not wish to see what the world had to show him; he did not like his eyes.

It is said that in his youth he deliberately chose to live seven years with his eyes closed.²²

Now, most of us don't see from one end of the world to the other, and -- despite everything I said this morning -- we don't see deeply enough into other people to know whether they come from Brooklyn or Queens, much less whether they descended from Cain or Abel!

But I trust we are all sensitive enough to relate to the Holy Seer's feeling that vision can be a burden. Just turn on the news: economic disaster, violence and terror, hunger and homelessness, ongoing genocide, torture. Everywhere we look we see deception, manipulation, and new depths to which we never imagined our country could sink.

In just a short time we will leave the cocoon of this synagogue, and the sanctity of Yom Kippur, and we will once again see all the things that are so painful to see. Perhaps we too would prefer not to see what the world has to show us.

I spoke earlier about seeing the image of God in every human being -- and I believe with every fiber of my being that we can and that we must. But it's also true that there are people in this world who make it really, really hard.

No wonder the Seer chose for seven years not to see. Many of us make the same choice, consciously or unconsciously. Partly because it's too overwhelming, too sad, and too frightening, and we can't take it all in. And partly because it makes us feel responsible, and guilty, and helpless. That's one of the reasons *why* we don't really see each other. We don't want to see another person's pain and need; if we did, we'd either have to do something about it, or live with the fact that we did nothing. Truly, the Holy Seer's "gift" was a burden -- a burden that few of us would choose, and even fewer of us could bear. So we can, and should, allow ourselves some measure of selectivity; we need to know and respect the limits of what we can handle seeing, and when. To protect ourselves, to keep from going insane, sometimes we need to turn off.

But at the same time, we do have an obligation to work on how we see. Perhaps we can't handle seeing everything, but neither is it okay to see nothing, or to close our eyes for 7 years. We need to expand our capacity so that we can bear to see more; we need to learn how to see, and we need to learn what to do with what we see.

22. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 136.

There is a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov on this, it is one of his most famous. The Baal Shem Tov taught that everything we see, good or bad, is shown to us because it is within us. Think about that (I'll say it again): everything we see is shown to us because it is within us.

On one level, this is just a statement of reality. Earlier we spoke of transference and projection -- seeing through self-colored glasses. For all our claims to objectivity, the human mind is extraordinarily subjective. We see what we expect to see, what is familiar. When we encounter something completely alien to us, that we can't relate to at all -- good or bad -- most of the time we don't really see it. We either filter it out completely, or we subtly or not so subtly transform it into something we can relate to. We conform reality to what we already believe, what we think, what we value, what we know. It's why two people witnessing the same event will give completely different stories of what happened, why two people listening to the same lecture will hear completely different things. And in this way, the Baal Shem is right -- what is shown to us is within us -- we see what we are.

And conversely, we are what we see. What we are exposed to -- and especially what we choose to focus on -- shapes who we are; what we let into our consciousness becomes part of our consciousness. The laws of kashrut teach us that some foods are spiritually healthy and some are spiritually damaging. The same is true of what we consume visually. Why would we go to a film that fills our eyes and souls with brutality and violence? Why would we allow ourselves to absorb the degradation of a human being in the guise of entertainment? Does the world not show us enough genuine ugliness, that we need to manufacture and consume even more?

But if it's true that we see what we are and we are what we see, now it seems we have a problem. If we are only capable of encountering what is already within us, and if what shapes us is what we see and encounter, then we seem to have an endless loop, that just keeps affirming and reaffirming itself. How is change possible?

It is possible because the Baal Shem's teaching isn't *merely* a description of reality. It's a call to higher awareness that can break the loop. And in that way it's the key to transformation, and to teshuvah.

Some things are hard to see directly. The sun, for example, is softer on the eyes when we see sunlight reflected off an object. It is similarly too harsh to look directly at ourselves. Parts of us, yes, we can see directly. But often, to really get a good look at ourselves, we need to soften the view, we need to see ourselves reflected, refracted in the world around us.

Last night we spoke about the innate desire of the soul to be revealed and known -- the desire of the yetzer hara, the evil impulse, to be seen through, and thereby elevated. This morning we talked about our need for human mirrors -- people who will have the courage to reflect back to us, lovingly and carefully, who we really are.

It turns out that all of reality can be that mirror, if we choose to see it. In an expression of God's great love and compassion, the world is constructed in such a way that there are lessons everywhere. Everything we see, everyone we encounter, is an opportunity for self-reflection and growth.

The reflection of our negative side is, I think, pretty familiar. Most of us know that when we are particularly critical of other people, when someone pushes our buttons, makes us crazy -- chances are it's because they remind us in some way of ourselves. We know it's true, but it's still very hard -- because it means that just when we find ourselves most outraged, most intolerant, that's a good sign that we ourselves have some work to do.

I'll tell you a story about the extreme of this. It's another story about our friend Reb Zusya, who we met this morning, when he was mistaken for a beggar.

Once when young Zusya was in the house of his teacher, the Maggid of Mezritch, a man came before the Great Maggid and begged for advice and assistance in his business. Zusya saw that this man was full of sin and untouched by any breath of repentance, he grew angry, and spoke to him harshly, saying: "How can a man like yourself, a man who has committed this crime and that, have the boldness to stand before a holy countenance without shame, and without the longing to atone?" The man left in silence, but Zusya regretted what he had said and did not know what to do. Then his teacher pronounced a blessing over him, that from this moment on, he might see only the good in people, even if a person sinned before his very eyes.

But because Zusya's gift of vision could not be taken from him through words spoken by a human being, it came to pass that from this time on he felt the sins of the people he met, as his own, and blamed himself for them.

Whenever the rabbi of Rizhyn told this about Rabbi Zusya, he was likely to add: "And if all of us were like him, evil would long since have been destroyed, and death overcome, and perfection achieved."²³

Zusya takes this idea -- that what is shown to us is within us -- to the ultimate extreme. Whatever sin he saw, he took on as his own.

Now, we can't live that way, and I'm not advocating that we try. Most of us would be unable to function if we took responsibility for everything we saw.

But on a certain level, it's true. And even if it's not something we aspire to, it's worth thinking about. It's related to the reason our confession to sins on Yom Kippur is always in the first-person plural. If we are not ourselves actually guilty of committing each particular sin with our own hands or own mouths, we participate in creating a society in which those sins become possible, even permissible. As Abraham Joshua Heschel said: In a free society, some are guilty, all are responsible.

But this story about Reb Zusya also reminds us that while we need to see the image of God in others, as I said this morning, it's neither possible nor desirable to see *only* good in people. Zusya didn't want to see anything negative in anyone, so his teacher decreed, thinking to bless him, that he would see only good. But it turns out that Zusya's innate capacity to see reality and truth couldn't be artificially limited; he couldn't avoid seeing evil. So instead of seeing it in others, he had to see it in himself.

In this world, there is real evil and it causes real harm. We need to see it -- in each other and in ourselves -- so that we can help heal it if possible, or protect against it when it's not possible. And seeing the image of God isn't about seeing only the good and pretending that there's no bad. It's about seeing both/and; it's about balance, and hope

And so too is the Baal Shem's teaching that what is shown to us is also within us. It's not only about having our faults mirrored to us everywhere, but also our potential. If we are able to see positive traits and qualities in another person, it's because we have those very traits -- maybe only in a nascent form -- also within us. Sometimes I think that's one of the reasons we are attracted to each other, and even fall in love: because we see in someone else someone we want to be, something we admire, and part of us knows, that we could be more like that.

23. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, p. 237.

Now, of course, it's not only what we *do* see that can teach us about ourselves. What we *can't* see also teaches us something about ourselves. Sometimes there's evil we are simply unable to see, and that we get blind-sided by -- not because we don't have the courage to look, or because we don't want to have to act, but because it's genuinely not within us. Rabbi Simon Jacobson makes this point about the horror of the holocaust. There are atrocities that we can't relate to -- we can't fathom it and we don't see it coming -- because we're incapable of doing such a thing ourselves.

But what if what we can't see is the good? What if we have a hard time believing that someone is truly as humble as he or she seems? Or as giving, or as kind? Or as authentic in trying to serve God? What if we can't believe that words could truly be commitments, that some people tell the truth, and don't just say whatever is self-serving in the moment? If we can't see it, chances are we have some work to do on ourselves in precisely that area. And if we can't see the image of God in another person, chances are, we would do well to try harder to find the image of God in ourselves.

Now this reflective process of change works in both directions. Sometimes we see something that teaches us about ourselves, and we start to change who we are, and that affects the way we see. Other times we make the effort to see someone or something differently and that affects who we are. In this way, we see what we are, and we are what we see is a statement of hope. It is not, it turns out, an endless repetitive loop, but an opening for change, for redemption. It is the first level at which we exercise our free will -- before we choose what to do, we choose what and how we see.

So let's come back to the Holy Seer of Lublin, blessed or burdened with his extraordinary vision:

Once Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak [the Holy Seer of Lublin] was a guest in the house of Rabbi Barukh, the Baal Shem's grandson, . . . On the day before Shabbat, Rabbi Barukh took the Seer with him in his carriage when he drove to the mikveh, the ritual bath.

On the way, Rabbi Barukh gave himself up to the creative strength with which he gazed at his surroundings, and the landscape changed in tune with his thoughts.

When they got out of the carriage, he asked: "What does the Seer see?" Rabbi Yitzhak replied: "The fields of the Holy Land."

When they crossed the hill between the road and the stream, Barukh asked: "What does the Seer smell?" He replied: "The air of the mountain of the Temple."

When they dipped into the stream, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov asked: "What does the Seer feel?" And Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak answered: "The healing stream of paradise."²⁴

What is this story about? Maybe Rabbi Barukh was simply giving the Seer of Lublin a gift, relieving him for a moment of having to look at all the pain in the world, giving him a vision of the fields of the Holy Land, and the healing stream of Gan Eden, paradise. We too can help each other bear the burden of seeing; when what the world shows us becomes too hard to see, someone else can shift the prism, show us a different vision. Not to make one reality go away, but to balance it with another vision that is also reality.

Or perhaps this is a story about the healing power of being able to envision someone else's visions, to dream someone else's dreams. When we empathize with another's vision, when we

24. after Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, vol. 1, pp. 304-05.

try to see the world through someone else's eyes, we have the potential of ourselves being healed.

Or, perhaps this is a story about the creative power of vision. Even without the particular gifts of the Holy Seer of Lublin, or Rabbi Barukh, the way we envision the world affects how others envision it too. And more than that, it actually affects reality. "He gave himself up to the creative strength with which he gazed at his surroundings, and the landscape changed in tune with his thoughts." The world changes with how we see it.

Is this poetry? Absolutely yes. And no. We labor under the illusion that we can be passive observers of some objective reality out there. It's not true. Modern science is now confirming what the ḥasidim intuited long ago: mere observation affects the observed object. Seeing is a form of creativity. Great artists transfer that creativity into a physical form, musicians translate it into notes. But all of us create when we see.

What do you choose to see when you look at the world? What do you use your creative strength to create? A noble vision, or a debased one?

The higher we ascend, the more we mature and grow, and the more attuned we are to the Divine (both the transcendent God, and the Divine within and around us), the less our sight depends upon what is "shown" to us, and the more active we are in envisioning ourselves, other people, and the world, in ever holier ways. The more creative strength we have to gaze at our surroundings, and to change the landscape in tune with our thoughts.

We'll close with a final story:

One day the Baal Shem Tov promised his disciples to show them the Prophet Elijah. "Open your eyes wide," he said.

A few days later they saw a beggar enter the House of Study and emerge clutching a book under his arm. Shortly thereafter they watched him leaving a ceremony, taking along a silver spoon. The the third time he appeared to them disguised as a soldier on a horse, asking them to light his pipe.

"It was he," said the Baal Shem, "The secret is in the eyes."²⁵

We are waiting for Eliyahu, Elijah, the forerunner of redemption -- we all want to see him. Perhaps he is one of us in this room, or perhaps he is the creation of our collective vision, all of us together. You want to see Elijah? Open your eyes wide -- because the secret is in the eyes.

25. Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 27.

Kol Nidre

I am grateful for this,
a moment of truth,
grateful to stand before You
in judgment.

You know me as a liar
and I am flooded with relief
to have my darkest self
exposed at last.

Every day I break my vows --
to be the dutiful child,
selfless parent, caring
friend, responsible citizen of the world.

No one sees, no one knows,
how often I take the easy way,
I let myself off the hook,
give myself the benefit of
the doubt --
every day, every day.

On this day, this one day,
I stand before You naked,
without disguise, without
embellishment, naked,
shivering, ridiculous.

I implore You --
let me try again.

-- Merle Feld