

KOL NIDREI SERMON 5781

[Begin with mask on]

Gut Yontev. I begin tonight with a public service announcement about the importance of wearing a mask whenever you go out in public. Masks help decrease the chances of spreading the coronavirus, as well as other contagious illnesses; by wearing a mask, you protect yourself and others. In the State of Connecticut, this is required by law; it is also a requirement of *halacha*, of Jewish law, which prioritizes *pikuah nefesh*, the preservation of life, as the highest of values.

I mention all this at the start of my remarks tonight in order to make it clear that I believe in the importance of masks And I wear them. Religiously. Much like my collection of kippot, I have amassed a large collection of face masks, in enough colors and designs to match every outfit. So let me reiterate, I am adamant about the importance of wearing masks in public.

But I hate it.

And not because it's a nuisance or uncomfortable. No, I've gotten used to remembering to bring my mask, just as remember to carry my reusable bags. And I've become used to breathing through the cloth covering of the mask; I've ditched the ones that were too thick or constricting. So, it's not the discomfort.

What I hate is not seeing people's faces. I mean, their whole faces.

When people are wearing masks, I don't recognize them. It's already happened a few times. I'll be in the grocery store – ah, my big outing; the grocery store! – and I'll hear someone shout, from behind her mask: "Rabbi!" And then, the anxiety rushes in.

Oh no, is that person calling *me*? Uh oh. Maybe there's another rabbi in this aisle? Then I hear the person call out again: "Rabbi Cantor!"

Yikes! It *is* me she's calling. But who *is* that? Her voice gives me no clue as it's muffled by the mask. I peer at her; I'm a visual person, after all. I may forget names, but I never forget a face. The problem is, I can't *see* her face. Only a pair of eyes. And it's not enough. It's just not enough.

I apologize and ask who she is. I explain about how I didn't recognize her because of her mask. I'm embarrassed. Because, after all, I'm *also* wearing a mask, and *she* recognized *me*! She waves away my apology; don't worry about it, Rabbi, she reassures me.

But I do worry. I try to memorize what her face looks like when most of it is hidden.

And I wonder how she was able to know, with so much of my own face hidden, that it was me.

Tonight, we begin the 25-hour journey of Yom Kippur, a long night and day when we are bidden to remove our masks. Not the *literal* masks that we have lately been required to wear, but the figurative masks that we have worn all our lives.

Yom Kippur demands that we face ourselves, that we look ourselves in the eyes, unmasked and vulnerable. My teacher, Rabbi Aryeh Ben David writes:

I know there is something I want to do that is also physically impossible: I want to look into my own eyes.

Looking directly into the eyes of *another* is a powerfully intimate and vulnerable experience, possible only when there is deep love and trust. And still then it's not so easy.

Looking into my *own* eyes? Directly? Honestly?

...Standing in front of God - I need to see myself. With a lot of love and trust.

Aryeh Ben David asks us to close our eyes and imagine looking into our own eyes, looking "through ourselves," as it were. He reminds us that the eyes are said to be the window to the soul. When we do that, what do we see? He continues:

Rav Kook writes that if we were able to look into our soul, to journey through the myriad layers of fears, insecurities, and anxieties, we would end up looking at our true selves. And our true self is immensely beautiful, endlessly beautiful. And unique. And much needed in this world.

What he writes, says Rabbi Aryeh, seems odd to me. I have never thought of myself as beautiful. Maybe slightly above average, but on the whole pretty normal. Unique? I don't stand out in any earth-shattering way. Needed in this world? Maybe some people would miss me.

But that flawed perception of myself is because I am not seeing deep[ly] enough. I'm only seeing the surface me. I'm getting stuck in the layers of comparing, the random mess-ups, the negative comments of others. What Rav Kook is saying is of crucial, life-changing importance. If I could *really see all the way down*, to the root of my soul, I would stand back speechless. Wow. That's me? Awesome. I never knew.

This season, concludes Rabbi Aryeh, is precisely “the time to see ourselves as God sees us... and once we do manage to look into our own eyes and honestly appreciate ourselves – then we are much more ready and able to look into the eyes of another with love.”

This may sound like a strange message to hear on Yom Kippur, when we are about to engage in serious self-scrutiny, and confess to a litany of sins. Yet Reb Aryeh’s lesson is as much a part of Yom Kippur as is all the breast beating and confession. After all, how can we become the people we are called to be if we don’t take the time, in Reb Aryeh’s words, “to look deeply into our own eyes, and to discover that we are so worthy, so special, so beautiful. God implanted that beauty, our soul, within us. Not to see it is to neglect this God-given gift.”

So tonight, on Yom Kippur, we remove our masks, first, in order to see ourselves, in order to look into our own eyes, to peer into our own souls and to recognize the goodness, the unique spark of the Divine that lies within. And to ask: How do we remind ourselves of that goodness, that beautiful soul that lies at our core and *keep* it unmasked for more of the precious time we have on this earth?

We also remove our masks tonight *in order to see one another*.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

As a teacher and as a rabbi, I rely on reading faces. As I've said, that's difficult to do in person when people are wearing masks. But Zoom presents its own challenges.

Right now, as I'm speaking, I can't look around our beloved sanctuary to see your faces, to take in your expressions, to hear your reactions, your quiet murmurs of recognition, doubt or appreciation. So for me, right now, it's more of a one-way experience, rather than a dialogic encounter, a meeting that goes both ways.

And that's hard.

In an article entitled, "Till We Have Faces Again," Professor Terence Sweeney writes:

Every new semester, I print out a single sheet of paper with tiny pictures of each of my students, their names and majors listed underneath. I look through the roster, beginning the mental process of linking faces with names...

As we get ready to enter a semester of masks, online lectures, and Zoom meetings, I expect to keenly feel the importance of human faces...

And we *need* faces when we teach. If we were just information conveyers, we could wear masks forever, teaching behind screens and barriers—but teaching is about persons encountering truth *together*. As schools re-open under these bewildering circumstances, our masked status can be the occasion to remember the deep intimacy of teaching, the encounter of persons in a classroom. This means looking each other in the face and seeing neither an enemy nor a stranger, but a brother and a sister.

Professor Sweeney continues:

For teachers, the faces of students are unavoidable. When a class is going poorly, I can always tell: eyes glaze over; mouths set firmly shut when I venture a question. With reddening cheeks, I look at 25 students *staring* at me, demanding an explanation for my failure.

But when class goes well, the evidence is clear, once again, *in their faces*. It isn't so much that they look at me; rather, *they look at each other*... Ideas start to ping around the classroom.....they look at each other and see each other [as if] for the first time. Their peers—these people they chatted with hazily over beers at a party—turn out to be the people who might help them understand what it is we are doing here. *To teach well is to see human faces come alive.*

Professor Sweeney knows he has been successful when he observes his students *looking at each other*, seeing and listening to one another. He acknowledges that these students have seen each other before, over beers, in casual circumstances, but now, something has changed. Now, they *look at each other* in a new way. He describes the possibility of deep encounter of students in a classroom as “looking each other in the face and seeing neither an enemy nor a stranger, but a brother and a sister.”

The 20th century French Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, wrote: “The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation . . . In front of the face, I always demand more of myself.... the face presents itself, and demands justice. (Totality and Infinity 198, 294)

Seeing another person's face, looking into their eyes, ought to spark a sense of recognition, of connection, and even obligation. For that other person can no longer be wholly Other; that other person is made of the same stuff as I am, created in the Divine image, worthy of the same care and concern, implanted by God with a unique and beautiful soul. And if another is treated unjustly, then it is as if *I* am treated unjustly; if another is unloved, it is as if *I* am unloved. Once I really *see* the other person, I am obligated.

This is a radical notion, to be sure. It contradicts much of the noisy and divisive "us" and "them" rhetoric we hear today. But it lies at the heart of Judaism and indeed, of most faith traditions. And at the heart of this day.

Martin Buber put it this way: "All real living is meeting," he wrote in his book, *I and Thou*. And further: "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them."

"When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, *God is the electricity that surges between them.*"

Oh, how we human beings yearn to see God's face, to connect with God, with the transcendent, with that which lies beyond and deep within ourselves! On this holiest of all days, how we long to feel God's Presence.

Thousands of years ago, the Psalmist wrote:

לֵךְ | אָמַר לִבִּי בִקְשׁוּ פָנַי , אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ הָ אֲבִיבֶשׁ :

"To you my heart has said: I turn to seek you;
Your Face is what I'm searching for." (Psalm 27:8)

According to the Hebrew Bible, human beings are not ordinarily privileged to see God *panim el panim* – face to face. Even Moses, who is described as having experienced God *panim el panim*, is also told that he can only “see” God’s back. And there, sheltered in the cleft of a rock, Moses beholds a list of God’s attributes, a litany we repeat on Yom Kippur: “*Adonai, Adonai, El rahum, vahanun... Adonai, Adonai*, merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, assuring love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon.”

Like the Psalmist, like Moses before him, *we long to see God’s face*.

But what if God’s face is to be found in some of the places we least expect to find it?

What if God’s face is to be found if we took off our masks and tried looking deeply into our own eyes in search of the beauty within?

Might we find God’s face if we removed our masks in order to see one another?

Might we find God’s face if, when we looked at another, we saw “neither an enemy nor a stranger, but a brother and a sister”?

Might we see God’s face if we realized that seeing, *really* seeing another person, obligates us, demands that we reach out, that we pursue justice?

What if we were to recognize that “when we relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between us”?

אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ ה' אֲבַקֵּשׁ

God, Your Face is what I'm searching for...

On this Yom Kippur night, may we, may all of us, be blessed to remove our masks.

Source of Mercy, help us to look inward and outward, to feel and experience Your Presence.

May we see your face, God, reflected in one another's faces and in our deeds.

Amen.

כַּמֵּיִם הַפָּנִים לַפָּנִים, כֵּן לֵב־הָאָדָם לְאָדָם :

“As water reflects face to face so one heart reflects another.” (Proverbs 27:19)