

Warning: this sermon has adult themes and may not be appropriate for young children.

The Eyes of Blessing

Today we gather for YK- our holiest day of the year, connected through electronic devices rather than sitting together in this precious and beautiful sanctuary. Who could have imagined last YK, the world we would be inhabiting today?

Our towns and cities throughout the world have been transformed. Our lives have been transformed through physical distancing and despite the threat of this pandemic we have seen massive uprisings in our streets demanding justice, demanding racial justice. Over recent years and more so this year, we have become acutely aware of systemic racism and xenophobia that pervades our land. We stand today at a moment of reckoning, not simply as Jews but as Americans.

No longer can any of us look away from the death of unarmed black men and women in this country at the hands of those charged with keeping us safe.

In our prayer, unetaneh tokef recited earlier today we ask "who shall die by hunger, who by disease... but today, we must add, "Who shall die by gunfire?"

What can Judaism offer as tools for navigating this time? Can there be a spiritual antidote to the toxins that have infected our nation?

At a most fundamental level, Torah teaches in the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, that all humanity was created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

That is, every person shares the same Divine heritage. Mishna Sanhedrin focuses

on the supreme value of every human life by teaching that if any person causes a single life to perish, it is as if he had destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a single soul is as if they had saved a whole world. We Jews have been witness to this truth: many righteous souls who saved individual Jews during the holocaust have had the profound experience of meeting the scores of descendants who would never have been born without their saving help.

The Mishna comments further that all of humankind emerged from the same universal parent in order that we should recognize one another as siblings and with this recognition maintain peace among all the nations. And yet, our Torah immediately points out our human shortcomings. Just after the birth of humanity the Torah tells the story of Cain and Abel, the story of the first murder.

*And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.
And the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel your brother? And he said, I know not;
Am I my brother's keeper?*

This phrase haunts us in every age and certainly haunts us right now.
Am I my brother's keeper?
Could I be anything but?

In the Torah, God does not answer this question directly, but instead responds to Cain saying:

*What have you done?
The voice of your brother's bloods cries to me from the ground.*

Your brother's **bloods**- damim- The grammar is strange. It should say, in the singular, "The **voice** of your brother's blood cries out to me." But our sages explain that it is not only your brother's blood that cries out, but also the blood of

all his unborn children. (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5) Indeed the voice of our brothers' bloods are crying out to all of us. We must open the ear of our ears and listen.

Further on in the Torah (Lev. 19:6) we are charged with these words: Do not stand idly by your brother's blood. It is not enough to simply do no harm to others. There are sins of commission and sins of omission. It is our duty, as Jews, to speak out and to work in all possible ways to confront and change our culture of systemic racism and gun violence.

There are certainly many actions we can take, and so we must, but today we are here to discover our spiritual resources. For it is in our hearts that we find the root and power that motivates all of our actions. If there is one thing that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur teach us, it is that the inner work we do has an effect on the world we create.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev teaches that the phrase- to look with an evil eye, means to look upon something or someone in a way that separates that person from their Divine source. The "evil" eye (ayin hara) sees only the outer husk and attaches desire or fear to that person. This is akin to a curse, for it leads to terrible outcomes when we look upon another as an object of desire or fear. And this is why it was a Jewish custom to ward off the "evil Eye" of others by saying K'neina hara- meaning "no evil eye" let no one look upon my beloved with an evil eye- let no one look in a way that objectifies another person. For in doing so, we separate this human being from their Divine Source, from their Divine essence.

Instead our tradition teaches us to “look with a good eye” that is, give each person the benefit of a positive expectation. Levi Yitzhak teaches on a verse from Song of Songs that reads: “Your eyes are like the pools of Heshbon. Through Hebrew word-play he reads the phrase as “let your eyes be pools of blessing.” Let one’s gaze become like wellsprings that bring blessing to that which we gaze upon. In this way we connect that thing or that person back to its Divine source; through this kind of generous glance we draw down blessing upon them.

This is our spiritual challenge. We are inundated daily by two kinds of destructive messages; one fans our desires to acquire and consume and the other provokes existential fear for our lives. The spiritual work we must do has both inner and outer dimensions. Let our eyes be the eyes of blessing, that when we gaze upon others may we see their Divine root. This is the spiritual challenge of our times.

In Sept. of 2013, a miracle occurred in the form of a woman named Antoinette Tuff. She was working in the office of an elementary school in Decatur Georgia when a young man armed with an AK47 and 500 rounds of ammunition entered the school threatening the lives of children and teachers. She found herself face to face with this gunman, the only person standing between him and 800 children. Over the course of a few hours she managed to talk him down and eventually surrender to police. She began by asking him his name. Somehow, in the midst of this threat, she saw a human being with a name and encouraged him to remember who he was. She asked him about his life and shared with him her own heartbreaks. She explained afterwards that she saw the face of her own handicapped son in him. She saw his wounds; she felt his pain; and a miracle occurred. He was able to shift from

a robotic angry murderer to a human being, capable of feeling his own pain and allowing another to see his pain.

Afterwards, Antoinette explained that she had learned from her pastor to see herself as an anchor for God. Antoinette Tuff gazed upon this young man with eyes that became pools of blessing. Through empathy and compassion she reversed a potential tragedy, saving this man's life, her own, and that of hundreds of others.

To see the face of God in any encounter, is to change the face of the world.

May we never be faced with such a situation, but *kal va'chomer*- if it was possible for Antoinette Tuff to experience empathy when faced with such a threat, surely it is possible for us, in our beautifully ordinary lives to develop an eye that sees, that looks upon others as an expression of God, even and especially if they themselves are not able to see that. In this way we create a new world, *Hayom harat olam*- a world conceived in love. In this way, may our new year be one of blessings for our families, our community and the world. May this be our will and G-d's will - *Ken yehi ratzon!*

We now turn our inner eyes now to the myriad blessings that we have received from our dearest loved ones who are no longer with us but whose love continues to flow between the worlds, for as Ecclesiastes states, "love is stronger than death." We begin our Yizkor service in the Yizkor booklet on P.1.