

## An Eye That Sees, An Ear That Hears, and a Transcribing Hand...

Second Day Rosh HaShana, 5770

L'shana Tova-

The great theme of the high holy days of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur is Teshuva; of intense reflection, self-examination and the self-exposure of personal shortcomings, missed opportunities and transgressions against God and humanity. Rather than simply recalling the painful memories of ourselves at our weakest, most flawed and perhaps most human, we must use this heightened awareness to climb higher, to do better, to dedicate ourselves to life but more- to live in celebration of life. To appreciate, act and labor in the cause of life infused with the joy of life.

Our holy Hebrew language has many words for those deeds that stand in the way of life- they are called Ma'asim Ra'im, evil deeds or Avonot, inequities. They are referred to as b'mezid or b'bishgaga- accidental or intentional, Peshaim or Aveirot- acts of commission or omission. Listen carefully for these words in the liturgy of the days to come and you will hear them often. But the all-inclusive term for human acts that stand in opposition to life is Cheit- sin. In Hebrew, Cheit means missing the mark, going astray from the path of life. Sins are the entanglements that knot up our lives and destinies, the actions, decisions, hurt and lashing out whose consequences cling to our characters, actions and relationships. They are the carbon footprint that we leave on our souls and the souls of the world.

Untying those knots, resolving those entanglements and erasing that footprint is the only agenda item of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. Hearing the Shofar, bowing before God during Musaph, hearing the terrifying account of the Akeidah, the sacrifice of Yitzchak, Tashlich and finally, the grueling twenty-five hour fast of Yom Kippur are all means to achieve Teshuvah, repentance, the removal of life obstacles. But what causes us to need Teshvua in the first place? How do we avoid falling into Cheit, into missing the mark, into sin in the first place?

In the Talmudic tractate of Pirkei Avot, the sayings of the ancestors, Rabbi Yehuda gives some advice. *Reflect on three things, and you will not fall into Cheit*, he says. *That there is an eye that sees all, an ear that hears all and a hand that transcribes all of your deeds.*

Rabbi Yehuda, great teacher of our people and editor of the holy Mishna, do we dwell in an Orwellian universe where big brother is watching us? Is that the heritage of Israel to the world? Is this what Rabbi Yehuda means: "Don't think

that you're getting away with anything, because judgment is coming and there is no where, even in the innermost thoughts where you are not being watched, heard and all of your words are being recorded to be used against you?" In such a crushed and constricted world, what room is there for spontaneity, joy, hope or victory of the spirit? Can this be the world that Rabbi Yehuda speaks of?

Think about Rabbi Yehuda's world, the world where the Mishna was written, Israel in the third century: the world of the occupation of Rome over Israel that lasted for five hundred years.. A world where the teaching of the Torah and living a Jewish life were often made a crime against the state, where keeping Shabbat, wearing Tefillin or making a bris for your son were punished by the cruelest measures imaginable. To our shame, informers from our own people were only too ready to reveal the secrets of their neighbors and even the Rabbis, especially the Rabbis, were always in peril. During Yom Kippur, the martyrology or Eleh Azkarah comes as a reminder of this grim world, where your words, deeds or things said about you could lead to torture and death. The writing of the Mishna, a concise, simple collection of discussions about Torah, law and life, must be seen in the this context. It was a final act of defiance, a statement that the Jewish people would somehow survive even Rome. Could Rabbi Yehuda have really been comparing God's presence to the Roman occupation?

Is that world so different from ours? Have you ever googled yourself? It's fun, isn't it? You discover your mark upon the year. How about a background check? How about a credit report? How about words in emails that we think have been deleted but continue to exist in servers, sent document files or who knows where? How about Twitter, comments on Face Book said by you, about you, words that you know about or don't know about? For those who enter public life, the scrutiny, blurring of boundaries between private and public, on the record and off the record, has been rendered null and void; a hand that transcribes everything indeed.

Words that you might have said twenty years ago but no longer believe to be true can be invoked and you called upon to defend attitudes that you abandoned and transcended as if you had just spoken them.

The internet, mirror of popular consciousness, has become the archive of humanity, an archive that takes no account of the capacity of people to learn and even to change, a memory bank that freezes each of us and pigeonholes us into a category.

And yet...it's so comforting to be connected, isn't it? To know what's going on with the world and with each other. That little buzz, that vibration or pop tune

or ding lets us know that we exist. Why do our teenagers find the text message so compelling? Because for them, the peer group is how they are learning to define themselves, the kiln in which their identity is forming. How wonderful, how life affirming to be able to comment, share perspectives, to dialogue at all times in all places. We live in a world of people endlessly in discussion with each other- an eye that sees, an ear that hears and a hand that transcribes- or texts- everything. How could that not be wonderful?

Because instantaneous accessibility degrades and distorts the boundaries of the individual and the complexity and depth of human interaction. Is it by accident that the widening of bandwidth has seen a corresponding polarization of attitudes in our country? Is there no connection between the rise of the eyes that sees, ear that hears, the twittering hand and the growing prevalence of incivility that extends from the staged over the top battles of daytime TV and reality shows and contests to sports, pop culture and the floor of the United States Congress? Is banging on the table the only way to be heard? Has the information stream become so loud that the places where real communication takes place: the meeting of eyes, the brush of a hand, a wry smile, a passing comment that, when you have time to think about it later, reveals the heart- are all lost in the cacophony and rush that passes for connection.

A few years back, writers were marveling at the supposed multi-tasking ability of the internet generation who could be IMing ten friends, watching a movie on their cell phones, playing with there DS and writing a term paper. My friends, I've been in the classrooms and I've seen those term papers. All I will is OMG.

But it's not our kids' faults. It's not technology's fault. Don't cut off the DSL lines or cancel the contract on your blackberry or I-phone. Instead, resolve, on this Rosh HaShana, affix times- I recommend Shabbat- when you will turn off all other eyes and ears and transcribing hands and devote yourselves to being with those you are with and being where you are.

Real connection comes at a different level, in a different way. Torah- the nurturing dialogue that has been going on among Jews for millenia cannot exist without true connection and neither can love, meaning or the full expression of your humanity. There are times when, if we are to be true to ourselves and true to the message that we are here to convey, we must, we MUST set aside for deep reflection both alone and with those whom we trust. We must learn to seek connection not through the comforting buzz of the hive, but through silence, through gentleness, through meditation and prayer, through writing and speaking our deepest truths. When we seek to connect at the level of soul to our lives and to those we love, then and only then can we understand the words of Rabbi Yehuda, teacher of Israel:

Here is how I hear his words, speaking of the eye that sees, the ear that hears and the hand that writes and how they can help us remove avoid Cheit- the obstacles in our path as compassionate human beings:

Realize that we are all connected, not in a superficial sense, but in the most profound way possible to the Source of all being. There is indeed an Eye that sees but it is not the narrowed eye of judgment. There is an eye that sees all of your struggles, all of your trials and dreams and hopes realized and unfulfilled. There is an eye that sees and all of your battles with loss and pain and loneliness matter more than you will ever know. There is an eye that weeps with your weeping, that sees value in every aspect of your life. Do not doubt for a moment and do not give in to the false idol of despair or its icons fear and anger.

There is indeed an ear that hears, but it is not the ear inclined to hear pettiness or gossip. There is an ear that hears all the songs and all of the cries, all of the laughter and celebration and all of the questions and vexation.

And there is a book of your life and your life's work: your every deed has meaning beyond anything that we can imagine. There is an Archivist of our deepest longing, our sorrow, joy, our innermost thoughts who does not miss a single precious word. Know this, B'nai Yisrael, remember that all that we do makes a difference in the life of the world whether we are aware of it or not. In our tradition, the redemption is constructed not of boiling seas and fire and brimstone, but rather in the accumulation of the smallest acts of daily kindness, compassion, humor and love. If sin is the ultimate apathy, that nothing really matters, then its opposite is the realization that everything matters. That is the message of Rabbi Yehuda. In the words of William Wordsworth:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

For the true connecting and experiencing and living exceeds the bandwidth of any technology that can ever be. My beautiful friends, Mount Sinai will not be televised. L'shana Tova.