

## On Seeing and Being Seen

Rosh Hashana 5776 / Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein

Shana Tova and *gut yuntif*. This past summer, like many of us, Julie and I traveled a good deal to see family and friends. Invariably, this meant spending many hours in airports (sometimes even more than expected) and of course many hours on airplanes as well. What a relief it was when we would finally sit down in our seats, not unlike the relief we feel when finally sit down on Shabbas or on yuntif.

But for me on some of those flights, there was an even greater joy: the joy of finding a superhero movie to watch. Certainly, it's not the most refined genre out there and there's little character development, but I just can't help myself, silly though it sounds. It's my guilty pleasure.

I've wondered from time to time what it is exactly that so captivates me about these stories. I think it's this: an essential part of every superhero narrative is the secret identity of the hero. Batman is really Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent is really Superman and so on. At times, the entire drama revolves around the possibility that the hero's true identity will be revealed. This plot point begs a very fundamental question: deep down, who are they really: the hero with a mask or just a mild mannered reporter?

We also have two identities and face the same question on Rosh Hashana. Who am I really: the person that people see or the one that is hidden? Of course, in a sense we are both. There is an essential part of me that is Rabbi Aaron, a rabbi, a leader, and a teacher. Yet there is another essential part of me that is just Aaron. Though these two identities are closely connected, they're not always quite the same.

The Talmud in *Masechet Berachot* (28a) relates that the great sage, Rabban Gamliel denied access to the study hall to any student who was "*ein tocho k'baro*," any student whose inside was not like their outside - meaning that one's external behavior did not reflect their inner character. However, the same piece of Talmud also records the opinion of R' Elazar Ben Azaryah, who granted access to the Beit Midrash to all who wished to learn.

In this regard, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was the realist, Rabban Gamliel, the idealist. Ideally said Rabban Gamliel, we would all be completely integrated, our inner essence matching our exterior, but the Talmud acknowledges that complete integration - to our internal character match our outward behavior - is not so simple.

A famous Chasidic story is told about the great sage Reb Zusha. While many of you may have heard it, it's famous for a reason. Reb Zusha was found agitated and upset as he lay on his deathbed. His students asked, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the great things you've done, your place in heaven is assured!"

"I'm afraid," Reb Zusha said, "Because when I get to heaven, God won't ask me, 'Why weren't you more like Moshe?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' When I get to heaven, God will ask, 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say?!"

On Rosh Hashana as we stand before God, we confront Reb Zusha's piercing question: why weren't we more like our true selves this past year? Why didn't I say what I really felt? Why didn't I stand up for that person?

Often the answer is simple yet profound: fear. It's scary to be ourselves, to share our convictions, our hopes and our dreams. What if people don't accept me or respect me? *Is this really a safe place for me to be myself?*

And so, we live in an ongoing negotiation between our public and private worlds. Many days we may struggle to live up to Rabban Gamliel's call for authenticity, for our inner selves to match our outer exterior.

This challenge of authenticity arises in our interactions with others as well. How can we help those around us to be their truest selves? What does it take to create a space - a family, or relationship, or community - where each individual feels safe enough to be themselves? I think it requires a deep openness, where each person feels seen and valued for who they are.

In yesterday's Torah reading, we read of Hagar and Yishmael, who are sent away to the desert. On the verge of death, the Torah tells us *VayifKach Elohim et Eineha VaTeireh B'air Mayim*. God opened her eyes and she saw a well, and she went and filled the flask with water, and helped the boy to drink. What does this mean - God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. Had she not seen it previously? Had there been an actual well there which this woman, dying of thirst and scared for her son as well, had just missed?

A beautiful midrash on these verses says as follows (Midrash Rabbah 53:14):

אמר רבי בנימין הכל בחזקת סומין עד שהקדוש ברוך הוא מאיר את עיניהם מן הכא ופקח אלהים את עיניה ותלך ותמלא את החמת

We all have the status of blind ones, until the Holy One opens our eyes. *HaKol b'Chezkat Sumin* - we are all assumed to be blind until God opens our eyes and we can really see.

On Rosh Hashana we hear the shofar and it forces us to open our eyes. Rosh Hashana is a day of clear eyed focus, of seeing. We take a very good look at our lives, who we were in the past year and who we hope to be in the year ahead and we ask ourselves, where we have strayed? Is there a dissonance between our external and internal selves? And if so, what do I have to do to get back to myself. *That* is what we *see* on Rosh Hashana.

But Rosh Hashana is also a day of *being seen*. Rosh Hashana is the holiday where we believe that everything in the world is seen and everyone is noticed. The mishna (2:1) in masechet Rosh Hashana teaches us that:

בראש השנה כל באי העולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון

*On Rosh Hashana, all who have come into this world pass before God like “Bnei Maron.”* The Gemara wonders, what exactly does this phrase mean, Kivnei Maron, which we'll say during Musaf today in the famous piyut, Unetaneh Tokef. Three explanations are offered: *Kivnei Maron* could mean that everyone passes before God like the sheep of a shepherd. It could mean that each one of us passes before God like the soldiers of a battalion. Or finally, we could all be hikers ascending a sheer cliff, one by one by one.

Three rich images to describe our process today, but no matter how you interpret it, the message is the same: God watches over each and every individual and creature. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov is reported to have said, “God cares for every blade of grass and every hair on your head.” God is the ultimate seer and on Rosh Hashana, each one of us is seen. We are seen and also aspire to see ourselves and those around us for who they really are. We also *hope* to be seen, to be *counted* and *considered*.

These themes of vision and authenticity are ubiquitous. They are central to politics, to art, and to Judaism. They even appears in a very surprising place: the world of avantguard, artisanal food and a strange craze that is sweeping the nation: high end, made to order, gourmet *toast*.

In his essay entitled, “A Toast Story,” journalist John Gravois describes this phenomenon and explores where did this bizarre trend come from? His answer took him all the way to the edge of San Francisco to a place called Trouble Cafe.

Trouble Cafe and the entire toast craze was started by woman named Giulietta Carrelli. Carrelli's story is pretty heartbreaking. Since she was a teenager she has suffered from

something called schizoaffective disorder, a condition that combines symptoms of schizophrenia and bipolarity. For years, her illness was a blind struggle. When she would she experience an episode, it was like a kind of death: “Sometimes I don’t recognize myself,” she said. “I get so much disorganized brain activity, I would get lost for 12 hours.” She attended three different colleges, lived in nine different cities before she was thirty, was incapable of maintaining close personal relationships and even experienced homelessness and drug abuse.

So how did her life turn around? In 1999, Carrelli was living in San Francisco and studying at UC Berkeley. She took a long walk through the city to China Beach, a small cove west of the Golden Gate. On the beach, she struck up a conversation with Glen, an elderly man sunbathing in San Francisco fog. In a German accent, he told her that people congregated regularly at China Beach to swim in the ocean. He had done so himself when he was younger, he said, but now he just came to the beach to sunbathe every day.

Carrelli left San Francisco shortly thereafter, (“Everything fell apart,” she says.) But her encounter with the old man made such a profound impression that five years later, in 2004, she drove back across the country and headed for China Beach. When she arrived, she found Glen sitting in the same spot where she had left him in 1999. That day, as they parted ways, he said, “See you tomorrow.” For the next three years, he said the same words to her pretty much every day.

A routine developed. She would sit and scribble furiously in her notebooks, and Glen would ask her questions about her experiments with strangers and coconuts - Carelli once stood on a corner with a sandwich trying to offer it to people and no one noticed her. Then the next day she tried it with a coconut, and sure enough, she struck up a conversation instantly and shared the coconut with her new acquaintance.

Eventually Careilli landed a job at a coffee shop called Farley’s that she managed to keep for three years. But Carrelli’s grip on stability was still fragile. Between apartments and evictions, she slept in her truck, in parks, at China Beach, on friends’ couches. Then one day in 2006, Carrelli’s boss at Farley’s Coffee discovered her sleeping in the shop. Instead of calling the police, he told her it was probably time she opened up her own space.

With \$1,000 borrowed from friends, Carrelli opened Trouble Cafe in 2007 in a smelly, cramped, former dog grooming business, on a bleak commercial stretch. She called the shop Trouble, she said, in honor of all the people who helped her when she was in trouble. She put toast on the menu because it reminded her of home: “I had lived so long with no comfort and cinnamon toast was our comfort food growing up. You can be

angry at the world, but you can't be angry with toast." She put coffee on the menu because it represented speed and communication. And added coconuts as well, which for Carelli represented survival—because it's possible, Carrelli says, to survive on coconuts provided you also have a source of vitamin C, so she threw in grapefruit juice as well. Toast, coconuts, coffee and grapefruit juice.

At this point, Carelli is stable, a mother of twins and creating an organization to support other people with mental illness similar to her own. She takes the same route to work every day and chats with as many people as possible. She wears the same outfit every day and has covered herself with tattoos because she knows that one of these people may be her lifeline in the future. The trick was to be identifiable: *the more people who saw her and recognized her, the more she stood a chance of being able to recognize herself. The more she was seen by others, the more she could see herself.*

I have to confess, I have been wanting to share this story for a long time - maybe a year or more. And I've wondered, what is it that resonates for me so deeply with this story. On the surface, I love a good food story, but I think the story of toast and Giullietta Carelli is about much more: it's a story about being seen and the message is one for all of us. The more Carelli was seen by others, the more she could see herself. The more we are seen by others, the more we can see ourselves as well.

To return to the subject of heroes: who are the heroes of this story? Certainly, I think Carelli is a hero in her own way. She managed to pull her life together despite significant challenges posed by her condition. But she didn't do it alone. Other people who saw something in Carelli along the way.

Glen, the elderly German man (Jewish as well) had a conversation with Carelli in 1999 that stuck in her mind for FIVE YEARS. It left such a strong impression that she drove cross country and headed straight for China Beach in search of Glen. When she returned, Glen uttered three simple words that became a constant for her: "see you tomorrow." These three words and their prior conversation may well have saved Carelli's life.

Then there was owner Farley's, where Carelli worked for three years. I think that most of us, when confronted by someone sleeping in a coffee shop would have called the police. Instead, the owner suggested that she start her own coffee shop. What a difference that made.

The third hero, I believe, was the journalist who reported this story, John Gravois. As one colleague said to me, "to me, the most amazing part of this story, is that we actually

know it, that someone noticed something new and took the time to learn more.” Gravois bothered to look into it, and share it, with all of us.

All three of these people saw something in Giuletta Carelli that almost *everyone else had missed*. Each of these people noticed within her a certain degree of humanity and holiness, enough to speak with her, forgive her a transgression, see potential in her, and write about her. In this story, both the seers and the seen are heroes.

Rosh Hashana has many names, but by far the most intimidating one is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. When we stop to think about this aspect of Rosh Hashana - judgement, we cringe. We are being judged. Every single thing about me - the bad things I've done in the past year - is being seen, accounted for, and tallied.

But there is another side of it altogether: what a profound gift it is to be seen. When we feel truly seen for who we are, it's an unbelievable experience, one that can save or change lives.

In her book Teaching Children to Care, Ruth Charney describes how critical it is for children to feel seen in the classroom:

*“Developmental studies tell us that five year olds need to be seen so that they can be free to venture off, leaving the enclosure of the teacher for new experiences to play and work. Six year olds need to be seen so they will not climb walls. But I have also found that seven, ten, and thirteen year olds need to be seen...They need the encouragement and validation that comes from our best attention to their efforts. They need the safety that comes from the belief that their teacher sees them, knows them. Mutual trust grows from this security. When all children feel seen, they are released to work.”*

I think this is true for all of us as well, no matter our age. Being seen for who we are is critical. We know this because when we don't feel seen, we feel invisible or even worse. We feel like we don't matter, like our lives are of no consequence.

On Rosh Hashana, we experience the gift of being seen, of being counted by God one by one. I believe that we all, desperately want to be seen for who we are, for our gifts and also with our imperfections. We are constantly reminded that God sees us during these days of awe - he knows our secrets, our habits, our likes and dislikes. This is terrifying, but it's also liberating. How amazing to be able to be seen and be totally vulnerable.

It this model that we ought to try to emulate on Rosh Hashana. Can we really look at other people with a watchful caring eye - and not a judgemental one. Can we really take

the time to be present with people who are right in front of us - to notice them and see them for who they are?

One place where I've felt seen and been able to truly see people in our community has been during our Shabbat morning prayer class. It has been amazing space for each of us to learn together, look inward, and share with those around us. I feel such gratitude for the opportunity to connect in this way (and I hope that others will join us when we reconvene after the holidays).

“There is a story about Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. One day his older brother died, and a newspaper got the story wrong and printed Alfred's obituary instead. Alfred opened the paper that morning and had the unusual experience of reading his obituary while he was still alive.

“Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday,” the obituary began. Alfred threw down the paper. That's not how I want to be remembered, [that's not how I want to be seen], he said. That's not what's important to me, he said, and right then and there he decided to throw his entire fortune into rewarding people for bettering this world and bringing it closer to peace.”

Nobel changed his life because he realized how the world saw him. He was lucky to be seen and realize that he was *eino tocho k'boro*, that a dissonance existed between who he was on the outside and who he was on the inside.

We too have that capacity in the year ahead. May we be our true authentic selves in the year to come: seen and blessed by those around us so that we can answer the Reb Zusha's question and say wholeheartedly: I was truly my best self.

Shana Tova.