

*Notice Me*

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*Hiney Ma Tov oomanayim shevet achim gam yachad*, how good it is for this incredible community to come together, to pray together, to repent together, to grieve together, to give thanks for another year together and even to exhale together. For this past year has been, for many of us and many throughout this great land, one of the strangest, most divisive and most surreal periods in our memory. Could we ever imagine that the leader of the free world could not or would not unequivocally stand up and condemn neo-Nazis, the bare minimum anyone should expect from any politician across the spectrum. We are further unsettled because we feel we have lost the ability to ensure that the core values we live by will hold sway in this great land. And we are distraught about the indignities heaped upon our fellow human beings, people of various ethnicities, nationalities, religions, the many people who are deemed the *Other*.

We react this way because our faith so dictates. We react this way because such treatment contradicts the most sacred beliefs that define us as Jews. We react this way because quite literally *we* were there.

We do not even have to go back in time to Egypt or Babylonia, to the Syrian Greeks, the mighty Roman and Spanish Empires and of course to the unspeakable horror of twentieth century Europe. We actually experienced that chill of exclusion right here in our city and in this great land. We, our parents, perhaps our grandparents, our great-grandparents, all came here to look for America. The two million Jews who poured into this country in the half century at the end of the Civil War, mostly Eastern Europeans, came to this country penniless and uneducated. We were the masses without the classes, often packed into slums, the appalling likes of which few have ever seen. Less than two generations later their descendants rose to the very apex of American life.

Ah, but let us not forget, Jews dare not forget, how it was when we first tried to match achievement to ambition. Dean Frederick Keppel of Columbia University wrote, "One of the commonest references one hears with regard to Columbia is that its position at the gateway of European immigration makes it socially uninviting to students who come from homes of refinement." Dean Keppel and his successor Herbert Hawkes unceremoniously succeeded in dropping Columbia's Jewish population from forty percent in 1914 to twenty-one percent in 1918 and fifteen percent during the 1920's.

"We must put a ban on the Jews," Dean Frederick Jones of Yale said, even more directly, because their academic success discouraged gentile students from even applying.

By the mid 1930's half the students applying to American medical schools were Jews. Yet, in no other track of higher education was anti-Semitism quite so virulent or 'so restrictive' as the field of medicine because only seventeen percent of those Jews actually were admitted to medical schools. Up until the middle of the twentieth century Jewish attorneys were rarely recruited and even fewer

promoted to partnership. A prominent lawyer sought to buy a co-op in a fashionable Fifth Avenue building as late as the mid 1980's and was told by a member of that co-op board, "We already have a Jewish owner."

We have never forgotten these indignities, the way we were marginalized. Some reacted by submerging their Jewish identity and trying desperately to look and act like everyone else.

Jonah's mother simply could not understand what was happening with her Yeshiva-trained son.

"You're still wearing your *tzis tzis* I hope mine *zunele*."

"Mom, I have to look like everybody else. I actually dress like a banker."

"Oy, oy, mine *zum*, but you still keep *shabbas*, I'm sure."

"Mom in this job I have to work seven days a week. The competition is absolutely fierce."

"But food, you keep kosher don't you?"

"Mom I have to go out to dinner with clients. I pretty much eat what they eat."

Mama simply couldn't believe her ears. Long silence ensued then she finally spoke up:

"Jonah, my son, tell your mother, are you still circumcised?"

Well, yes, and just as importantly, we are proud citizens of a country that has helped us to achieve the most blessed and prosperous standing we have ever held in any country throughout Jewish history. You and I today are not trying to bury our history heritage, values, or faith. We know that our Jewish identity is a gift, even more, a worldview, a caring way to live in this unpredictable world.

In theological terms you could say that God placed an existential bet that you and I would define ourselves not in narcissistic self-centered terms, but as a people fully in touch with the reason we were created as God's eyes, ears, and conscience here on earth, determined to treat others better than we have been treated in most of our incredibly complex, embattled, and often blessed history.

Judaism's truth is that the creation of human beings was not an expression of God's grace but an expression of God's need. God needed us to accomplish together what neither could accomplish alone. Just as we continue to search for God, to understand who God is and how this God operates, so God searches for us. Think about this: almost every description of God that we have was given to us by men. Not surprisingly, God is "lord, king, man of war". There is only one description of God given to us by a woman in the entire Torah and it is not gifted to us by a Jew. Hagar, handmaid of Sarah, given to Abraham to mother a child while Sarah dealt with the incredible pain of infertility, did conceive and Sarah got so depressed that she in effect told Abraham, "One of us has to go." Mother and child, Hagar and Ishmael were exiled.

Hagar was in the wilderness and there felt the presence of God. And there she gave God a name, *El Rooe*, the one who noticed me.

The one who noticed me.

This is who God is. God sees when people are too often blind. And God wants us to notice too.

Our beloved Marv Gellman reminded us all of how powerful is the voice of Emily in *Our Town*. Emily had died in child birth and was given the chance to go back home one more time and she sees an awful lot. “Mama, I’m here. I’m grown up. Mama just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Let’s look at one another. Oh, we don’t have time to look at one another. I didn’t realize. All that was going on in life and we never notice. Oh earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?”

The urgency of noticing.

You think anyone noticed us when we were slaves in Egypt, or when we were packed in boxcars on the way to Auschwitz? Did anyone notice us when our ancestors were in steerage on the way to Ellis Island? We were the tired, the poor, the wretched refuse in Emma Lazarus’ words. We were teeming masses, mere statistics, not human beings created in the image of God.

God commands us: Notice—Notice those who feel rejected or degraded, victims of emotional and sexual abuse, loved one so stressed, so depressed, they may turn to drugs as soothing balm, the same drugs that can become a killers of the body and the spirit. Notice—those who live lives of quiet desperation, those who even in a family structure feel so totally alone.

Loneliness is the first state of being the Bible recognizes as perilous. *Lo tov hayot baadam l’vado*, it is not good for a person to be isolated, the *Book of Genesis* proclaims.

The story is told of an immigrant who approaches his priest and he is bursting with pride.

“Holy Father, my wife and I are approaching our fiftieth anniversary.”

“That is wonderful, my son. How did you accomplish it?”

“I always treated her well and never forgot her birthday. In fact, on our twenty-fifth anniversary I took her to Italy.”

“How wonderful! Beautiful country. I am sure you took her to the Holy See. So what are you doing for your fiftieth anniversary?”

“Oh, I’m going back to Italy to pick her up.”

There is a lot of loneliness even within marriage. Hopefully, not *that* much distance. Too often we stop really communicating or caring. We are too busy taking care of business, obsessively emailing, texting or tweeting; often we do not notice or do not evidence caring enough about the looming crises in our mate’s lives. Women often cease even *looking* for emotional support from their mates. Men can be incredibly lonely, as we talk subject matter, work, the markets, sports, but not what really eats at us, the diminishing self-worth which comes with advancing age and declining abilities.

Nearly a third of people older than sixty-five live alone; by eighty-five that jumps to fifty percent. I think you and I, this incredible congregation, this caring community, does a great job and can play an ever larger role in obviating the sense of being alone by being the most caring and inclusive community we can be.

Our children feel it too. One of our B'nai Mitzvah students stood on this bimah and talked about the incredible pressure he felt to be perfect, his spirit crushed by an insane schedule and his perception that there was nothing he could get off his plate and no one to talk to about it. The child terrified if she does not get into the family alma mater of three generations, how terribly disappointed her parents will be in her. Some of these kids are lonely, as they keep us at a distance. We have little actual face time. We don't look into their eyes for communication. We look only into our phones and do not see how much they need us even when they tell us to go away.

What loneliness there is when we lose someone precious to us. How hard it is to go from being a two—a couple, a team—to now going solo. At perhaps another stage of life, when we lose a pregnancy, for example, we deal with the death of the dreams that were welling up within us for that emerging child, the love that was already so overwhelming.

As you know, we need to be needed, yet there are people who don't even know how to connect and would so benefit from a gentle smile, a helping hand, a simple notice that they are out there floundering, drowning, in need of human connection.

And there is loneliness in our inability to forgive. There are far too many families in which one does not speak to another. Let us take a lesson from the Joseph story when the powerful Joseph stood before his utterly powerless brothers and decided to forgive them. They had thrown him in a pit to die. He forgave them, not so much for their sake, but for his. Because in that grand palace, surrounded by every luxury imaginable, by people waiting on him hand and foot, Joseph felt incredibly alone.

*Ani Yosef Ha-od Avi Chai*, I am Joseph, is my father still alive? At that moment Joseph needed to forgive, he needed to connect again.

Your parent from whom you distanced yourself is aging and infirm. Is there any way you can make it right?

You do not talk to that sibling for reasons neither of you can remember. Maybe it was a battle over your mother's brooch or some other stuff. I know you were angry, convinced that you were right. But heed the Torah's admonition: it is not good to be alone, to be isolated. It is time to reconnect, to swallow your pride, to forgive if not for their sake, then for yours.

Judaism begs us to notice. Torah reminds us at every turn that we were people who were not noticed in Egypt. In Germany and throughout Western and Central Europe, we were doctors, lawyers, accountants, neighbors and friends, then all of a sudden we were non-persons. We were not Franz or Helen. We were The Jews and suddenly reviled or invisible. Well, today there are many people invisible on our streets and in our midst. I was very moved by an article on the Op-ed section

of The Times in which a sixteen-year-old New Yorker was arrested on charges of stealing a backpack in 2010. The judge set bail at three thousand dollars; his family could not afford to pay that. So the teenager was sent to Rikers and spent the next *three years* there before the charges were dismissed and, haunted by his experience, he hung himself in 2015.

The article went on to say that nine out of ten defendants who are detained cannot afford to post bail. An even more horrible statistic is that of the 2.3 million people confined to correctional facilities in the United States less than a third have been convicted of anything.

Who knows? Who sees?

Brian Stevenson, who wrote a very powerful book *Just Mercy*, makes the sad point, “People of color in the United States are often assumed to be guilty and dangerous. In too many situations black men are considered offenders incapable of being victims themselves.” Too many people who do not live in their skin do not see.

But our tradition implores us and reminds us that it cannot be out of sight, therefore out of mind. We must open our eyes to:

- People who work two jobs and cannot afford housing.
- Families that cannot stretch their food dollar to the end of the week and are extremely food insecure.
- Kids struggling with gender identity issues that keep them feeling like they don’t belong anywhere.
- Our friend who because of mental illness or cancer retreats from the world. Do we let them be or do we refuse to let go?

Let me return to that sense of powerlessness we feel in light of today’s political realities. Looking out to our incredibly involved congregation, I know that political and social activism will be, if it’s not already, in your very near future. But for today, on these holy days, there is something you can do, something you can control. You may not be able to remake the political landscape, but you can reshape, even save, a life. Think about someone who feels alone, vulnerable, panicked. Be the lifeline. Perhaps it is that person next to your mother in the nursing home who really has no one. Perhaps it is a terrified woman in Texas who is carrying a child with a fetal abnormality, who lives impossibly far from an abortion provider and is desperately in need of financial and emotional support. Perhaps it is an immigrant who has worked and paid taxes for years who lives in desperate fear of a knock on the door and I.C.E. storming in, ending life as they know it.

Who sees? Who cares?

Viktor Frankl talked about such a person in the darkest of all circumstances, in Auschwitz: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offered sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a human being but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

The lesson: Control what you can control. There is something you can do. There is something you *must* do.

We can see what is right before our eyes and simply don't notice because, well, we have no time to look at one another, says Emily.

We can notice there is someone who is the victim of withering abuse. We can notice there is someone who is bullied, alone and terrified. We can notice there is someone who desperately needs your forgiveness. We can notice there is someone who awaits the fulfillment of your potential as a human being and as a Jew.

We can. We must—

Notice them.

Notice them.

Amen.