

## God of Seeing

On the first day of Middle School, my best friend dumped me. Maybe it was the braces or the acne, but for some reason, when she looked at me, she no longer saw the person that she'd grown up with. That was the prelude to those lonely two years when I felt invisible and alone.

On the last day of school, my 8th grade English teacher, Mr. Perkins, gave me a copy of Henry David Thoreau's "Walden". He wrote a message inside. He said – "Mira: Your perspective is unique and important. I hope you keep writing." I swear, those two years of Junior High - all the bullies, gym uniforms, constantly feeling misunderstood – paled in comparison to that single gesture. Suddenly I knew that Jr. High was not a reflection of my value and my potential in this world. Someone saw me. Someone valued me.

We all need to be seen. It's a basic human need that permeates the themes of these sacred days. As we engage with the three thousand-year-old human yearnings woven into our High Holy Day liturgy, we pray that God will see us and write our names in the Book of Life. We pray that we

might have a part in sacred community somewhere where we are valued, necessary, and seen.

During 5783, this need spoke through the wounds of the past years of isolation and loneliness. While the pandemic opened digital platforms to connect across physical barriers, we nonetheless felt desperate loneliness with rates of anxiety, depression, and overdoses at historic heights. We now bear the tragic irony of our digitized social sphere – we have more windows and doors into one another's lives, but far less seeing and feeling seen.

This High Holy Season, which looks towards a year of more digital innovation and barriers to connection, we are called to ask what it means to truly witness and embrace one another, and what it looks like to be abandoned.

This story of seeing and abandonment is a central theme of our High Holy Day Torah readings. On Rosh Hashana, we read the story of Sarah's miraculous pregnancy, which our tradition considers one of God's greatest moments of caring and embracing a marginal character - a woman. But in Sarah's shadow lives Hagar, the servant and surrogate. Once Sarah becomes pregnant, Hagar becomes redundant – perhaps even a threat to

Sarah's position. And so, Sarah casts her into the wilderness with the young Ishmael, where, without provisions or support, both will likely die.

The Torah offers not one, but two tellings of this story. Each ends in a different divine response to Hagar's abandonment that represent two aspects of seeing another – witnessing and embracing. As we explore these two versions of Hagar's story, we will start to understand how witnessing another helps us embrace their needs and shape communities of transformative connection.

The first telling of Hagar's story teaches us the power of witnessing. Hagar cries out in the wilderness, and God appears bearing witness to her suffering. *Shma Adonai el onyech*. God sees Hagar – really sees her, and not just “Hagar the stranger” or “Hagar, the backup plan” or “Hagar, the threat”. For Hagar, the ostracized, abandoned pariah, God's witnessing is a profound act of love.

In her gratitude, Hagar grants God a name – the first name God receives from a human in the Torah. “Ata el Roi,” she states – “you are the God of seeing.” Hagar exclaims: “Would I have gone on without you seeing me?”

As Hagar's cries suggest, being seen is a need that is core to our psychological makeup. Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein, pioneers of psychology's object relations theory, found that infants develop their sense of self through their guardian's gaze. When an infant sees a loving face looking back at them, they begin to differentiate themselves from others. And when that gaze is a loving gaze, one that responds tenderly to the infant's cry, the infant begins to trust that gaze of the Other.

This early experience shapes our adult relationships. We still seek someone who truly understands us and loves us for who we are – someone who cherishes our value. We seek someone who responds to our unique needs because they embrace who we are whole-heartedly.

We begin to really see someone through the act of witnessing. Witnessing is the art of showing empathy by being physically present and caring for another person's perspective and being. During the High Holy Days, another name we use for God is "Bochen Levavot" – the one who examines our hearts. The act of teshuva beckons God towards us and asks God to really see us – not just the mistakes and successes we've carried out in the past year, but the intentions behind those actions as well as our innate potential to recover from our mistakes and reflect our inner divine spark.

Being seen allows us to see our true selves and find solace in our darkest times. It lays the foundation for our sense of value, purpose, and being. When we really see another, we learn how to build communities that embrace their whole selves – their needs, their gifts, and their torah.

Our ability to see others opens the doorway to a second form of empathy that we discover during the High Holy Day retelling of Hagar's story – embracing.

In the second version of Hagar's story, God embraces Hagar and Ishmael. God provides food and provisions to save them, and God's messenger asks, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is at – ba'asher hu-sham."

The great medieval commentator Nachmanides explains the significance of these words – "ba'asher hu sham". They convey that God cares for Hagar and Ishmael by bringing them provisions exactly where they are so they don't have to travel through a dangerous environment for nourishment. This line of Torah evokes the art of embracing empathy that builds off the insights we gain through witnessing.

As we devote attention to another person's perspective and embodied experience, we gain a better understanding of their physical needs and how to embrace their place in our community by meeting them - ba'asher hu sham - where they are at.

We embrace others when we use our empathic wisdom to lovingly accommodate their physical circumstance – we meet people where they are at.

During the pandemic, our community's leaders leveraged the act of embracing to safely hold us together where we were at – their programming responded to the torrent of emotional needs and physical barriers from the pandemic. Lisa Schiff, our creator and director of Sholom Sprouts, successfully continued offering programming for new parents and toddlers, even when other local programs shut down. When I asked Lisa about the key to her success, she attributed it to "the power of the puppet."

She explained: "We couldn't rely on body language on a computer screen. Puppets helped us convey the right energy for a toddler using Zoom. Puppets gave voice to a sense of safety and let students know that even

though we couldn't be together physically, we could still be together in this format. The puppets transcended the screen."

Lisa models the power of embracing – applying empathic insight and understanding to design gatherings that embrace.

I can't count the number of times this year that parents pointed to Sprouts pandemic offerings as their path into our community. The act of embracing – meeting physical needs through empathy – meant that our community became a home and refuge to new parents in unprecedented times.

I wouldn't be here today if our community hadn't embraced my unique physical circumstances and helped me lead where I am at with my disability. Small modifications to prayer practices like tall stools for standing prayers seem like small details, but they communicate to me something big. They tell me I'm valued and welcome - I'm worth the effort – and they communicate to people like me that they too are welcome here. Embracing not only brings warmth to the embraced – it fosters a sense of openness, abundance, and possibility for our community and beyond.

These two acts of empathy – witnessing and embracing – are motifs in the greater Jewish ethics of hospitality, sacred community, and tikkun olam. It is through the quality of our interactions and the design of our meeting places that we build lasting, transformative connections with one another. We build kehila kedosha – sacred community. In Jewish tradition, it is through kehila kedosha that we become a light amidst humanity's darkness and agents of tikkun olam.

Our ability to witness and embrace others is profoundly important as we grapple with the challenges of the incoming year. Burnout, recidivism, and this strange economy ask leaders to reconsider how we come together at work. Empathy and flexibility are the most strategic responses to this bigger post-pandemic social dilemma – how we build the “new normal”. Witnessing is one response to burnout - supervisors discover and tap into an employee's innate talents as a natural source of productivity, something that requires the ability to really see someone and their potential. AI may take over routine tasks in the coming year, but only human beings can offer presence, understand new perspectives, and design working arrangements that meet people where they are at. Only people can bear witness.

Amidst this digital renaissance, our most human assets – our ability to bear witness, offer presence, and embrace others – are fundamental in shaping shared spaces of creative output, connection, and purpose. Our work begins by seeing each other.

Thoreau asks us: “What is [...] philosophy, or poetry; or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?”

This High Holy Days, we are invited to be seers and to be seen. - To witness the world anew. It is through the power of our witnessing and our embracing that we discover – we are not alone. Through our gaze lives the power to make purpose belonging and holiness. And so, we read in Walden: “Could a greater miracle take place, than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?”

In this coming year, may you be witnessed and embraced. May you turn your eyes towards the blessings just waiting to be seen – the secrets of a universe unfolded by seeing. Shana tova.