

Meet Me. Meet Us. Meet God.
Erev Rosh HaShanah 2018/5779
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In a large college lecture hall, hundreds of students sat silently taking their exam. Then time ran out. The professor called for the exams. As the students finished up, they tossed their exams on the professor's desk. A few minutes passed. The last few students desperately scribbled their final comments and left the auditorium. After ten minutes, only the professor, the stack of hundreds of exams, and one student remained in the room. The student kept writing. Five, ten, fifteen minutes continued to pass. The professor stood there, shocked at this student's chutzpah. Finally, the student finished. He walked up to the professor, exam in hand. The professor said: "Young man, if you think I am going to accept that exam, now twenty minutes late, you are mistaken." The student grinned: "Professor, do you have any idea who I am?!" The professor answered: "No, I have no idea, and to be quite candid, it doesn't matter to me who you are!" The student continued: "So, you're telling me that you have no idea who I am." The professor said: "No. None, whatsoever!" And so the student took his exam, shoved it in the middle of the big pile of identical exam pages, said "and now you never will!" and walked out of the room.

I remember my students at The Ohio State University where I had my first job as a rabbi telling me about these giant lecture halls. The teachers never knew their names and barely knew if they even showed up to class. They walked into giant halls, and silently sat next to someone they didn't know. Never making the effort to have a real conversation. Perhaps this is how some of you feel right now. I wonder how many of us here feel like we don't know the people around us. My guess is that many of us don't know one another. Being your new rabbi I know that's true for me. I've probably only met a fraction of you, and have only had a real conversation with a handful of you.

I am hoping, though, that that will all change. I am hoping that we will truly get to know each other as the year continues. I don't want to be the rabbi that stands up here on this high stage and never goes down to meet the people. I don't want to be the rabbi that is hard to find when we move out of our building. I know, all too well, what a true relationship can do for one's Jewish identity.

When I was in elementary and middle school, I hated religious school! I hated being forced to be part of my Jewish community.

I know what you are thinking; how could I stand on the bima on the High Holy Days of all days and confess to the entire congregation that I hated religious school and my Jewish identity!

Easy, it is very easy!

Because I can also share with you the exact moment when everything changed.

I might not remember how old I was, what topic I was learning, or my exact environment but I remember whom I was with. I remember the people who went out of their way to build a relationship with me, to care about me.

When I was in high school I was active in my temple youth group because of our youth group advisor. He went out of his way to build relationships with the teens of my community and helped foster the idea that even outside of temple and outside of youth group activities we should all be friends.

Also when I was in high school I was active in NFTY Ohio Valley. The Reform Jewish teen youth movement. In my sophomore year I decided to enter a national NFTY poetry contest. My chances of winning were zero. About a month before the NFTY National Convention I received a letter telling me that I was one of 3 finalists and I would have to read my poem in front of two thousand of my peers at convention. I was terrified. Right before I went on stage to read my poem, I don't remember what I was wearing or even the hotel where the convention was held, but I do remember the personal interaction I had with one of the Ohio Valley regional rabbis before I went on stage. It was the relationship I had with that rabbi that allowed me to get over my fear, step on stage, and read my poem.

Literally what saved Judaism for me was relationships.

It is all about relationships. Judaism is rooted in relationship. We have a responsibility to each other. Judaism has the remarkable potential for enriching our relationships with each other. Jews worship within the context of a minyan, a community. Jews study in *chevruta*, in partnership and friendly debate with others. Jews work together and with others in order to do *gemilut chasadim*, acts of love and kindness. Simply put, Judaism requires community to thrive. Even our most personal confessions, which we will recite together as part of worship on Yom Kippur in just a few short days, are done within the protective embrace of the community.

There are many types of relationships; surface level relationships that we have with acquaintances, communal relationships that we have with our social groups, and deep relationships that we have with those whom we are closest. I want to be a rabbi that has deep relationships with many of you. I want to know about you. I want to know what makes you tick? I want to know your likes and dislikes? I want to create relationships that mimic the ones described in our text as a *panim el panim*, face to face, relationship.

The phrase *panim el panim* only appears in Torah three times. It is a phrase reserved for a special kind of relationship. It first appears in Torah in that famous wrestling match between Jacob and the *ish*. In the middle of the night, just a few hours before Jacob and his bother Esau are to meet after being estranged for some twenty years, Jacob is visited by an *ish* who is described as both human and divine. They struggle until the break of day. Jacob prevails but walks away limping, his life having been spared and as our text reads; he has "seen God *panim el panim*" (Gen. 32:31).

There are many interpretations of this encounter. According to the prophet Hosea, the *ish* was a divine being sent by God. Others explain that the *ish* is actually the spirit of Esau, Jacob's brother, who comes to him with nightmarish reality, the two brothers then wrestle with the anguish and emotion that has plagued them for two decades or more. This encounter foreshadows what would come when they faced each other again. Immediately after Jacob's encounter with the *ish*, Jacob and Esau see each other for the first time in many years and immediately put the past behind them and emotionally reconcile their relationship.

I am sure many of us in this room are familiar with this type of story. A close relationship, possibly with a family member, goes astray for any number of reasons and many years later we reconcile those relationships hoping to once again face each other *panim el panim*.

The other two places where the phrase occurs is with Moses. Once in the Book of Exodus and once in Deuteronomy. In Exodus, we learn that Moses would pitch a tent outside of the camp and whomever sought God would go to the tent. Whenever Moses went to the tent, all the people would watch because a cloud of protection would appear while God spoke to Moses. The text explains that God would meet Moses face to face, *panim el panim*, in front of the Tent of Meeting, in other words, at the door to God's office (Ex. 33:11). God would speak to Moses as one person speaks to another. Commentators agree that the phrase is not meant to be taken literally as if God too had a recognizable face or actually speaks in the same manner as a person. Rather this phrase signals a deeply intimate, core relationship; a formative relationship. Our sages also believe that in order for the two to speak, either God elevated Moses to be at the same level as God or God came down to Moses' level to meet him, when they were in conversation.

We each, too, have a relationship with someone whom we feel is at a different level. If Moses and God could communicate at the same level, so much the more so should we be able to communicate with each other in the same way.

The final appearance of the phrase comes right after Moses' death. We are told, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses – whom the Eternal singled out, face to face." (Deut. 34:10) The most important aspect of Moses' leadership was his ability to have a *panim el panim* relationship with God. Some commentators even believe this verse is the original ending of the book of Deuteronomy. I believe this verse as a possible ending to our entire Torah teaches that the relationship that Moses had with God is the ideal relationship for us to emulate.

On the surface, it seems obvious that facing each other helps create an intimate relationship. Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, who was a major figure in the Mussar Movement, which focused on how developing values such as kindness and thoughtfulness in speech teaches, "It is quite natural that when a couple addresses each other lovingly they look into each other's face, and that shows the closeness between them; and when two people become distant from one

another, each turns the other way; for facing always indicates closeness and turning one's back always indicates distance." (Daat Tevunot 154)

Ultimately, the *panim el panim* relationship between God and Jacob and God and Moses is not merely an ideal one described in the Torah, but it is a Jewish value that we must transmit to our everyday lives. In an era of electronic screens and digital communication that allows us to speak with others around the world with a touch of the button, we must often remind one another that engaging face to face with others is a value we ought to pursue. I hope to build relationships with the members of this community that exemplify this type of human interaction. I hope no one will be able to add something to a pile on my desk without me knowing to whom it belongs.

But I cannot do this alone. While I build relationships with you, I hope you will build relationships with each other. We can't be Jews if we are alone. We need each other in order to live lives of meaning and purpose. Holiness can only be created in relationship. You can be a Jew without praying in Hebrew. You can even be a Jew without believing in God. But you can't be a Jew alone. You can't be a Jew living on a mountaintop and you can't be a Jew sitting anonymously in suburban comfort. To be a Jew is to sanctify your relationships with others in order to bring whatever you believe God to be into the world. Judaism teaches us how to live with others, beginning in our homes with those whom we feel closest to. It extends to our friends, our congregation, the larger community and the world beyond. It is not until we create sacred relationships that we can create sacred spaces.

In the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, there was a tiny room, the most sacred space in the Temple, called *Kodesh Kodshim*, the Holy of Holies. And in it, was the Holy Ark. This was the space where God supposedly dwelled among the people. We learn very detailed instructions of what this space is to look like. Torah tells us that we are to "make two cherubim of gold...at the two ends of the cover." (Ex. 25:18) Exactly what these cherubim are is up for interpretation. Commentary describes these cherubim as having human faces. It was taught that when the people of Israel fulfilled God's will, the cherubim would face each other; and when the people of Israel did not fulfill God's will, the cherubim would face the walls of the room. (Talmud, Bava Batra 99a) It is not until we are able to face each other, building relationships, that we can bring the Divine presence into our community.

Jacob and the one he wrestled, Moses and God, me and you, you with the ones you are sitting next to, us together. But how?

We must listen to each other. We must learn together. We must include each other. We must face each other with the hope that even in our differences we can come together.

I stand here this evening, starting a new year, starting a new job, starting a new life, ready, to listen to your story and to get to know you. As many of you know, I spent my last seven years serving as a rabbi at a congregation in New Jersey. My only regret is that I only created true relationships with a select few. Therefore, as I start anew, my personal hope for 5779 is to build

relationships with as many of you as possible. My communal hope is that each of you will reach out to those around you and build relationships with each other. Not just surface level relationships, not just online relationships, not just relationships that last inside this building, but true relationships where we can meet each other *panim el panim*. Not until we meet each other face to face will we then turn this into a sacred community.

Let us imagine returning one year from now, on Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780. If I accomplish my goal, I will no longer be looking out into a sea of mostly unfamiliar faces, if you do your part, this service will never again feel like the large lecture halls my Ohio State Students experienced, but we will be looking into each other's eyes, knowing each other's stories, and feeling like we have truly created a sacred community.

Remember that poetry competition. Only because of a meaningful relationship I was able to go on stage and recite my poem in front of two thousand of my peers. And I won.