

My Neighbor, My God Rosh Hashanah 5765 *Rabbi Zoë Klein*

A congregation,
Assembled for Kol Nidre service
Yom Kippur eve,
waited for their rabbi,
Rabbi Salanter.
The sun had already dipped below the treetops.
Where was he?
Fearing some tragedy might have befallen the rabbi,
They left the house of worship
To look for him.
He was not found in his home.
The streets and alleys were searched in vain.
About to give up hope,
One of the High Holy Day ushers
noticed a light in the window of a shack,
Peering inside,
he saw the saintly sage
Seated by the side of a cradle,
Rocking it gently.
The usher exclaimed,
"Rabbi! The entire congregation is looking for you!
The time for beginning Kol Nidre is already past.
What are you doing here?"
Motioning for the usher to lower his voice,
The rabbi softly said,
"On my way to synagogue,
I passed this house and heard a baby crying.
Receiving no reply when I knocked,
I entered, and saw the baby was alone.
Since the infant's parents had evidently gone to synagogue,
I remained here to rock the baby to sleep and watch over him."

This is a very famous story of Rabbi Salanter,
If you were a member of that congregation,
Imagine, you have come to services
With a wrestling soul,
questioning heart,
Seeking the soothing wash
Of ancient song,
And the rabbi doesn't come,
After waiting some time,
You join others in searching the moonlit alleys,

Genuinely worried,
Or, perhaps, annoyed,
And then there he is,
Peacefully rocking a cradle.

At this revelation you might
Praise the elegant profundity
of the rabbi's simple message...
Be born into elation
And deep understanding, a quiet Zen,
Proud, knowing you've participated
In a Holy Day that would become part of a famous story,
Retold on other Holy Days hundreds of years later,
Ignited that in your searching
You not only found the rabbi
But a message about love
More poignant than any prayer.

Or, you may be irritated,
Even, angry,
How arrogant of the rabbi
To hold his entire congregation hostage to his need
To do a good deed,
Could he not have found a non-Jew
To baby sit the child?
After all, what difference would it make to the child!
It is not as if the child will remember,
It is not as if the child would have necessarily been worse off
Had he been left to cry himself to sleep!
This rabbi forsook his entire congregation,
People who will remember
That this was the year they did not hear Kol Nidre,
This is the year they received no uplift,
No comfort or consolation,
He sacrificed all of our needs,
For what? A baby's sleep?
He cares so little for us?
You might think he preferred to be there
beside the baby,
Perhaps he had no sermon prepared
And came up with this clever distraction.
You might see the rabbi's actions
As a commentary of rebuke
Against the entire congregation

Because of these parents' carelessness.
You might be livid at those parents.
Because of their neglect
The entire congregation must suffer.
You might feel empty, hurt.

Our Temple has been struggling
Over whether or not to move
Our High Holy Day services
From the Century Plaza hotel this year
Because of a strike
Of the workers of seventeen
Unionized hotels in and around Los Angeles.
The strike vote was Monday.

I imagine
What would happen tomorrow morning
If there is a strike,
Would this congregation look for me,
Find me on a picket line in my white robe
In front of the hotel,
Maybe you'd join me
And we'd learn and argue
Talmudic passages on labor,
Become part of a famous story,
And be invigorated,
Vitalized,
Never again hear the blast of the shofar
Without thinking *Si se puede...*

Or, would you be angry,
The arrogance
To choose the needs of strangers
Over the congregation,
After all,
What difference would it make,
It is not as it they will remember us
In our time of need,
You might be livid at the parents,
Like the mother and father who left their child
Alone to worship,
Livid at the parents, the Union and management both
Whose neglect
Created crying and wailing,

So that our entire congregation must suffer.
Are we a congregation
That would cross the picket line,
That would walk by the shack with the crying inside
To get to our house of study,
Lit, swept and set up
By scab labor?
Would our prayers make sense?

Once when he was sick, Rabbi Salanter's students asked him
To instruct them in how to supervise the baking of matzahs
To meet his high standards,
Since he was not well enough,
And the Rabbi answered,
"If you want my matzot to be truly kosher,
you should be most careful with
the woman who kneads the dough.
She is poor and a widow. Do not scream at her."
For Rabbi Salanter,
The matzah was kosher
If the workers were treated kindly.

Perhaps his most famous words were:
The material needs of my neighbor become my spiritual needs.

Knowing this,
It becomes clear
That for Rabbi Salanter,
Sitting beside the cradle of a poor family's baby
Was not a matter of arrogance
Or rebuke of a congregation,
Rather,
It was as sacred a commandment to fulfill
As standing on a bima on Yom Kippur.
The cradle with the sleeping infant, for Rabbi Salanter,
Was no different than an entire congregation.
The light in the window of the little room
Beckoned him to rise and enter
No less than the open doors
Of an ark of the covenant.

Martin Buber,
The great Jewish Philosopher,
understood this to be true.

For when he was in his office studying
a student, named Mehe came
And knocked on his door,
Martin Buber welcomed the student,
He heard Mehe's story,
He heard but he didn't listen,
His heart and his mind wanted
To return to his studies.
Months later
A friend of Mehe's came to the
Towering giant of modern philosophy
and told him
That Mehe had taken his life,
that when the student had come to Buber's office
He wasn't looking for a polite ear
And casual counsel,
He was looking to make a decision
A decision that meant life or death.
The philosopher was devastated,
And it forever changed the course of his thinking,
He realized that there was no point
To his academic writing
Or teaching if he failed
To be truly present for the people around him.
His philosophy was permanently redirected.
He created a new philosophy,
called I-Thou.

He wrote:

When a person encounters another person in total immediacy,
he or she may also experience a glimpse of God...

When I confront a human being...he is no longer he or she, limited by
other hes or shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a
condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of
named qualities, neighborless and seamless, he fills the firmament.
Not as if there were nothing but he, but because everything else lives
in his light.

Rabbi Schulweis wrote

"When Martin Buber was asked where is God,
He was wise enough not to say God is everywhere,
God is in churches or synagogues,
God is found in relationships.

God is not found in people,
God is found in between people.
When you and I are truly attuned to each other
God comes down and fills the space between us
So that we are connected and not separated."

"The material needs of my neighbor
become my spiritual needs"
was one of the favorite quotes
of Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas
for whom the face of the other
was as beautiful and terrifying,
awe-inspiring and radiant,
vulnerable and naked,
mysterious and unknowable
as the Face of God,
every face,
every human face,
was a gateway to infinity.
To look upon a face,
Anyone's face,
Is to look into the flames
Of the burning bush,
To be in anyone's presence is to
Be on holy ground.
The face is a revelation.

Levinas wrote
"When in the presence of the Other
I say 'Here I am!'
This 'Here I am' is the place
through which the Infinite
enters into language..."

The idea
That God is found between people
Is not new to Judaism.

It is written in Pirkei Avot:
When two people sit
and words of Torah pass between them,
the Divine Presence rests between them.

Rabbi Shimon adds:

If three have eaten
at one table and have not
spoken words of Torah,
it is as if they had eaten sacrifices
offered to the dead.

I read "Torah" in this context with its broader meaning,
As wisdom and kindness,

If you encounter people
And have spoken words of wisdom and kindness
The Divine Presence rests between you,
But if you encounter people
And have spoken no words of wisdom,
No words of kindness
It is as if you have worshipped idols,
And made sacrifices to dead gods...

Charles Francis Adams,
himself the son of John Quincy Adams,
wrote in his diary, "went fishing with my son, day wasted."
His son wrote in his diary that same day,
"Went fishing with my father,
the most wonderful day of my life."

How idolatrous of that father,
Worshipping his work,
His earnings,
His ego,
All dead idols,
When right there
By the lake
Was not a loose bundle of named qualities,
But a bright, upturned
Adoring face,
Neighborless and seamless,
Filling the firmament,
Everything living by his light,
His joyful sunshine
On the best day of his life...
God is in the connections between people,
And when we don't appreciate those connections
We are idolatrous.

Rabbi Akiva said the greatest principle of the Torah
Is "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Gospels came along and said,
In the book of Mark,
That the commandment
to love your neighbor as yourself
is second in importance to loving God,

But our sages,
like Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said:
Whether a person really loves God
can be determined by the love that person shares with others.

And Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi wrote,
"Before prayer it is proper to say
'I hereby am accepting upon myself
the commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself.'
This commandment to love one's fellow Jews
is the gateway to coming before God in prayers."

So that the one, loving your neighbor,
Is not a separate command,
Second to loving God,
But intricately woven with the first,
A gateway to the first.

Both Martin Buber
And Imanuel Levinas believed
We speak of God too soon.
And I am guilty of this,
Talking of God,
When I should be
Talking more about godliness,
Contemplate God less and
God's image in the face of my neighbor more.

On September 11th this past Saturday,
Looking out my window,
I could see the giant moonbounce
In one neighbor's yard,
Celebrating the third birthday
Of the little boy that was born
On that tragic day,

And in another neighbor's yard,
Between me and the giant moonbounce,
A family somberly
Clearing out the garage
Of their father who had just been buried,
Meticulously laying out
All that he had acquired in his long life
In dusty stacks and rows
On the yellowing yard.

I must, like Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi,
hereby accept upon myself
the commandment of loving my neighbor as myself
as the gateway to coming before God.
The commandment to love my neighbors
At the gateway to the very hotel I wish to enter
To pray and beg forgiveness of my God.

But in many ways,
I have always found it easier to
Imagine that I could imagine
The Infinite,
Than to confront the human other...
It seems safer
To engage with God,
The Most High,
The othermost other,
Than with the
beautiful and terrifying,
awe-inspiring and radiant,
vulnerable and naked,
mysterious and unknowable
face of him or her
created in that image.

Easier to say "Here I Am"
To the intuited will of God,
Than to say "Here I Am"
To definite needs of people.

Easier to be concerned with the kashrut of matzah
Than with the pain of the woman kneading the dough.

Rabbi Salanter wrote:

First a person should put his house together,
then his town, then the world.

God forbid that the people in our house
Feel that we didn't say "Here I am,"
To their beautiful faces!

The material needs of my neighbor
Become my spiritual needs...
The definition of neighbor doesn't start
Outside the walls of our home,
But inside,
And it is hard,
To find sanctity in tedium,
Not everyone is like Rabbi Salanter,
Contented to rock the cradle
When a large crowd down the street
Is eager for his presence.

Rabbi Hisda said when the Torah says
"In want of everything,"
it means in want of a wife,
because a partner,
for Rabbi Hisda is everything...
like for Buber,
neighborless and seamless,
she fills the firmament.
Not as if there were nothing but she,
but because everything else lives in her light.

But Rabbi Yosi acknowledges how hard that is,
He is recorded in Talmud saying:

"Indeed a suitable match may seem easy to make,
yet God considers it as difficult a task
as dividing the Red Sea."

And how many times has the sea been divided,
One time since creation?
And this is how difficult it is
Not to find a perfect match,
But just to settle for a suitable match?

First a person should put his house together...

Just as the definition of neighbor doesn't begin outside your walls,
The definition of house does not end with your walls...

And so even when one has left that house,
Not for a minute think that that person
Is no longer a part of your house,
That forgiving, or seeking forgiveness
Is not a part of putting your house together
Now that you have left,
Or she has left,
Or he has left,
When people divorce, tradition teaches
That the very altar sheds tears.
Heal your house
Means have respect for all the people that have
Created that house,
A marriage of thirteen years
As opposed to fifty years is no less of a marriage,
You still have an obligation
Not to destroy the person you shared that with,
To help them and yourself to live again,
Standing tall,
Put your house together.

God is found in relationships.
God is not found in people,
God is found in between people.
When you and I are truly attuned to each other
God comes down and fills the space between us
So that we are connected and not separated.
And even if we become separated,
What was cannot be discounted,
Because God can never be discounted.
A relationship, a marriage,
Was never time wasted,
Anger does not cancel out a love that was,
Because it is written,
Love is strong as death...
Not anger,
Love is strong as death
Which means the death of a marriage,
The death of a long, loving friendship after a terrible fight,
Or stupid misunderstanding,

Even the death of a person
Doesn't cancel out the connection that was,
Nothing does,
As it is said:
Death ends a life, not a relationship

And grief is the price we pay for love,
And how lucky we are
To have had something that makes
It so hard to say goodbye.

First put your house together, then your town...

The prelude to an election
Is never designed to foster neighborliness.
We are encouraged
to divide into parties,
Defending real and arbitrary lines
Between us.
Buying into the notion
That good fences make good neighbors,
But sometimes fences that are too good,
Too high and too strong,
Create small scale cold wars
Between people
Who might otherwise
Have much to share.

We want to put our town together as a community:

On every other seat,
You should find a brochure
For Temple Isaiah's Mitzvah Mall,
Created from the idea that
We buy gifts and give tzedaka,
But these are not the only ways to give,
This year, tonight, you can choose a mitzvah from the Mitzvah Mall,
And pledge to do it in honor of someone,
For the recovery of someone, or in memory,
And we will notify the person of your heartfelt gift.

Join us to plant trees in a park,
Sing and celebrate holidays in retirement homes,

Cook and deliver kosher meals to people
Living with HIV or AIDS,
Clean a beach through Heal the Bay
Where we will be joined by a local mosque,
An opportunity for outreach to our neighbors,
Organize a food pantry through SOVA.

First put together your house, then your town, then the world...

As Rabbi Gunther Plaut wrote:

"In ancient times,
most people had little awareness
of events beyond their immediate vicinity.
They had no share in major political and economic decisions...
until the results came upon them
in the form of invasion, deportation,
new tax demands...
Only in recent centuries...
has the average person had the knowledge,
the opportunity,
and the obligation to apply the golden rule,
on a global scale."

This Yom Kippur
Rabbi Lee Bycel will be fasting
Along with the thousands of Sudanese children
Who have no choice but to fast,
Who are starving in refugee camps
In Eastern Chad.
The morning of October 21st
He will be coming to our Temple
To share his experience with us
And to tell us how we can
Reach out to our neighbors in the Sudan.
In the past years we've supported
Mevasseret Tzion,
Our sister synagogue in Israel,
And we continue to bridge the world
To our brethren there,
Helping them to build a synagogue
To house our shared values.
They are our neighbors.

What if the face of your neighbor

Is a cruel face?

How then do his material needs become your spiritual needs,
How then do you love her as yourself?

We talk of the golden rule as if it stands alone,
But we must read it in context,

Torah reads:

You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart,
Rebuke your neighbor,
but incur no guilt because of him.
You shall not take vengeance
or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk.
Love your neighbor as yourself.

Rebuke your neighbor
But incur no guilt upon yourself because of it...

You do not have to love your neighbor blindly,
But must rebuke and correct
So long as you don't damage yourself in the process.

As author Alice Duer Miller wrote:

If it is very painful for you to criticize your friends, you're safe in doing it. But if you take the slightest pleasure in it, that's the time to hold your tongue.

But what if the face of your neighbor
Is not only rude,
But relentless,
Not only mean,
But murderous...
Must I love?
Must I be concerned with his needs
When he hates me so?
When he wants to kill me?

You can say this in your heart,
You are a vicious and horrible person
And you have given me every reason
in the world to hate you,
You have hurt me and the people I love,
You are cruel,

Violent,
Menacing,
Dangerous,
Wicked,

But I am commanded
To love the image in which you are made,
For you are made in the image of God.
It is not a leap of faith,
It is a leap of love that I make in saying that,

And it is a shame that
You have so distorted
The image in which you are made,
The image I love,
Perhaps I can help you restore that image,
To the place where the radiance of your
Beautiful face can shine,
But if you won't let me,
I will bring no guilt upon myself,
I will not hurt myself or let you hurt me,
And so I must turn away.

In Taanaim it is written
"There were once twin brothers
who were identical in their appearance.
One was appointed king
and the other became a criminal
and was hanged.
When people passed by
and saw the criminal hanging,
they exclaimed, 'the king is hanged.'"

Elie Weisel in his book Night
Wrote of a child who had been hanged
In Aushwitz, who was so light
He did not die quickly,
He wrote:
For more than half an hour he stayed there,
struggling between life and death,
dying in slow agony under our eyes...
He was still alive when I passed in front of him...
Behind me I heard the...man asking, "Where is God now?"
And I heard a voice within me answer him,

"Where is He? Here he is,
He is hanging here on this gallows."

Whether the face of the other is a known criminal
Or an innocent child,
We must say when we see them,
The King is hanged,
The image of God is being strangled,
Dear stranger,
You are a congregation to me,
Dear child,
Your face an open ark of the covenant,
Here I am.

And to the executioner who put the rope on the child,
I hate how you've abused the image in which you are made,
And to the God who allowed this tragedy to happen...
What can I say...
But perhaps we talk of God too soon...
I cannot concern myself with God
God can be concerned with Godself,
I have barely enough time in this world
to look after God's image
Which I find in my neighbor.

I will be concerned with the matzah
After I've tended to the widow kneading the dough.
I will be concerned with my philosophies
Once I've listened to my students.

Next week we may meet here at the Century Plaza,
Or we may relocate somewhere else
If there is a strike on Yom Kippur,
And if we relocate somewhere else,
Choosing ethics over convenience,
Know that we will all of us
Have entered a little house,
Perhaps not nearly as grand as what we are used to,
A small dimly lit shack,
Where there is an infant in a cradle,
As we pray, we will be sitting by the cradle
Rocking it until the crying stops, bringing
Peace to new fresh eyes,
Peace to little curious ears,

Peace to a new strong heart,
Peace to little reaching arms,
Peace to little restless legs,
For in the cradle,
It is our eyes,
Our ears,
Our hearts,
Our arms and our legs,
Pure as the day we were born,
Emerging from their husks,
Shedding the dead idols
We've collected like calluses.
Here I am, son,
Here I am, daughter,
It is the most wonderful day of my life too,
Here I am, neighbor,
Here I am, stranger,
Your material needs are my religion,
I do unto you as I would have you do unto me,
Here we are,
We are Temple Isaiah,
Founded by Rabbi Albert Louis,
Named for the prophet Isaiah
Here we are,
We are Temple Isaiah,
And our motto is "Justice justice shall you pursue,"
Here we are,
Making a leap of love,
We are Temple Isaiah,
And to belong to Temple Isaiah
Is to belong to the world.