Panim El Panim
The Power of Looking into Each Other's Faces
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There is no feeling quite like holding a newborn in your arms. The warmth of the child's body, the softness of their skin, so small, so beautiful, so miraculous. There is an unparalleled sense of wonder, seeing the connection to the past, the present and the future, all within the exquisite features of the baby's tiny face. Looking into each other's faces, that moment of *Panim el Panim…* There is something truly holy in that moment.

While you are entranced in the moment, the infant is studying your face and learning from you. Faces provide information, helping babies learn to recognize familiar people. Babies learn to read emotions like happiness, sadness, and anger. By watching mouths move and hearing sounds, infants learn the sounds and words of their native language. Moreover, gazing at faces helps a baby's brain to develop, fostering empathy and emotional connections with others. By 15 to 18 months, babies can start to recognize their faces in a mirror as they begin to develop a sense of self.

Such is the power of *panim el panim,* looking into the face of another, and its importance never goes away. Seeing a person's face is crucial for adults because it enables deeper social connections, improves communication, and supports psychological well-being.

Face-to-face interaction provides a wealth of information—from subtle facial expressions and eye contact to another person's overall emotional state. From our earliest beginnings, our ancient ancestors have studied each other's faces to learn how to become fully human. There is a reason that human beings are called the social animal.

25 years ago, I gave a sermon on the landmark book **Bowling Alone**. The theory, articulated by the author Robert Putnum, argued that there was a significant decline in Americans' civic engagement and social connections, as well as a loss of "social capital," that would threaten the health of democracy and communities. Using the metaphor of increased individual bowling participation but decreased league bowling, Putnam demonstrated that Americans were increasingly disconnected from each other and from institutions. They were no longer engaging with one another, no longer seeing each other's faces. Putnam's predictions were nearly prophetic as we consider the level of loneliness and the corresponding levels of depression in our society. What Putnam could not have predicted was the impact of a pandemic, or the meteoric rise in technology and social media. Our last Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, declared loneliness an epidemic in the spring of 2023. Murthy explained that loneliness is far more than "just a bad feeling" and represents a major public health risk for both individuals and society. Murthy also pointed out that, although many people grew lonelier during the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of American adults had already reported experiences of loneliness even before the outbreak. While 36 % of Americans say that they experience serious loneliness, the number jumps to 61% among young adults 18-25.

It is common knowledge that technology has had a significant impact on our social connections and the most basic of human needs, face to face contact. When I gave that sermon in 2000, 32% of Americans owned a cell phone. I was still carrying around a pager. Since that time, we have moved from cell phones to smart phones, from texting to Facetime, from Zoom to AI. All of us can point to their benefits and none of us would even imagine a world without them. The benefits to every avenue of society including this synagogue are too great to think otherwise. Hundreds of people are joining this service online and what a blessing that is. But we would be foolish not to acknowledge the impact that all of this has had on human beings and that instinct for face-to-face contact.

Today, AI chat bots serve as psychologists and medical care providers. They have become friends, even lovers, to some. There are Rabbinic Chat bots as well. You can bring your Jewish questions to Rabbi Ari, or Aish HaTorah's AI Rabbi, but beware you will most likely get an Orthodox ruling from what is currently out there. I was deeply relieved to see a review of AI Rabbis with the following warning: *These AI systems can offer information on Jewish laws and traditions, but they do not possess the nuance, empathy, or authority required to provide true rabbinic counsel.* Whew! Of course, this message was generated by Google's AI platform!

In all seriousness, there is proliferation of religious apps out there and tens of millions of people avail themselves to them every day. My own sense is that they can serve a positive purpose, helping people discover the power and beauty of religious teachings.

However, this technology is designed to adapt itself to the user and not to challenge them, not to make demands on them to serve the larger community. One big risk is that the religious bots promote further isolation, robbing their users of the ability to find the spiritual strength that only a community can offer. Judaism is never solely about the individual. It is not a religion for one. That is why we have a minyan. Like everything else AI, religious apps are a mixed blessing.

More concerning is the impact of AI generated partners for younger people. A recent survey found that 20% of young adults say they interact with AI chatbots more than they socialize with real people. Moreover, AI interactions are designed to be easy—there's no need for compromise, emotional labor, or deep conflict resolution. Not surprisingly the numbers are increasing exponentially. There is a warranted fear that over time, people who rely on AI for companionship may lose the ability that comes with face-to-face human relationships. That is to navigate complex human emotions, making actual human face to human face relationships even more challenging. Will we lose our ability to converse, to find good partners, to mate?

With all of the blessings that this technology, most notably AI, has brought us, we are also seeing the impact of the human experiment with which we are engaged.

What happens when we stop seeing each other *face to face* and no longer perceive each other as equals, much less human?

Going back to the baby that studies our faces, that is the first place we learn empathy. Is it any surprise that over the past 30 years empathy has decreased dramatically in this country. I will remind you of the words of Hannah Arendt who wrote the landmark study of the trial of Adolph Eichmann. "The death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism." Her words serve as a profound warning. It suggests that when a society loses its capacity for compassion, it

becomes vulnerable to injustice, cruelty, and moral collapse. Consider what is happening in our country, the coarseness of our communication, the quickness with which we judge and condemn others, the way our public officials portray their opponents. This is the result of a society that has stopped looking at the face of others, has stopped seeing the common humanity of the other. Empathy is not just a personal virtue, not a frivolous luxury, but a cornerstone of civilization, fostering cooperation, justice, and ethical responsibility. What applies to us as Americans applies to our brothers and sisters in Israel as well.

You might wonder why I chose tonight to discuss such a difficult subject. The answer is that Yom Kippur is the day on which the Jewish people celebrate the power of seeing others face to face. *Panim el Panim*. The bold statement that our Jewish tradition makes this day is that the face that we begin this process with is that of God and then to the faces of others. You will recall that when Moses brought down the Torah, the word of God at Sinai, the people were dancing around the Golden Calf, the ultimate act of apostacy. In essence, they were replacing the face of God with that of an animal that they had created. In so doing, they rendered themselves unworthy of the covenantal relationship that had begun with Abraham and Sarah.

Moses broke the tablets at the foot of the mountain. What follows was a painful period reckoning, of Teshuva on the people's part. Following that, Moses approached God again. The Rabbis say that the day that Moses ascended the mountain again to beg for the forgiveness of the people of Israel was Rosh Hodesh Elul, the first day of that month.

On top of the mountain, Moses argued for the survival of the Jewish people even though God had offered to make a new people from his seed. God was moved to forgive the people based on Moses' words and example. But then Moses did something remarkable: he asked to see God's face *Panim el Panim*. Like a child looking up at a parent, Moses is pleading to know the Almighty fully. God refused, informing Moses that no person could see the Divine face and live. There are limits to human knowledge. God then says to carve the second set of tablets as a sign of forgiveness and be ready the next day.

That next day, 40 days since the new month of Elul, is the 10th of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, the day that the people were fully forgiven because Moses and the people had made Teshuva. They had returned to God to face the Almighty and to open themselves to the possibilities that this covenantal relationship held. It was on that day that God passed before Moses and, rather than see God's face, he was able to perceive the Divine attributes:

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ה ׀ ה אֵ֣ל רַח֣וּם וְחַנּ֔וּן אֶ֖רֶךְ אַפַּ֑יִם וְרַב־חֶ֖סֶד וֶאֱמֶֽת׃

a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness,

נֹצֵ֥ר חֶ֙סֶד֙ לָאֲלָפִ֔ים נֹשֵׂ֥א עָוֹ֖ן וָפֶ֣שַׁע וְחַטָּאָ֑ה וְנַקֵּ֖ה

extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin

Hearing of God's mercy and compassion. Moses pleads with God:

וְסָלַחְתָּ לַעֲוֹנֵנוּ וּלְחַטָּאתֵנוּ וּנְחַלְתָּנוּ׃

Pardon our iniquity and our sin and take us for Your own!"

The Torah records the first Yom Kippur. To this day, we use Moses' words as we ask for pardon and continue to repeat the attributes of God again and again as part of our liturgy, in the hope that God will pass before us as God did with Moses, to not see, but experience God's face and be seen as worthy of forgiveness.

This remarkable story is what makes for the uniqueness of Judaism and the power of this day. Yom Kippur is not only about winning forgiveness from God but from each other, the only beings created in the image of God. Based on Moses' example, Jews face each other *panim el panim*. We are reminded of the inherent worth of every human being, so by looking into each other's faces we also see the glimmer of the face of God and hope that others will see the same in us. Just as Moses asked God for forgiveness, so do we approach each other with the same hope.

Today is Yom Kippur. It is the day when we fully embrace the idea of what *panim el panim* means both in the time of Moses and every year since. We are called to stand before each other, see each other's face and apologize. Not through a text or an email, or a voice message but *Panim el Panim*. To give the offended person the chance to hear your words and look into your face and hopefully see the sincerity. To look into your eyes and perceive that you are truly sorry.

I believe that the message of Yom Kippur contains the most important message that I could offer you in the times in which we live. Something that is so needed, not just once a year but every day. In the year ahead, let us act as we were created to do from our infancy. Let us look more deeply into the faces of those we meet and see them, *panim el panim.* Let us slow down and take a moment, make eye contact and ask others what is going on in their lives, are they doing alright? Let us listen to their answers without interruption, without looking for the first opportunity to talk about ourselves or think about what we are missing on our smart phones in the moment. Let us resist the urge to offer advice until it is sought. Just sincerely asking the question "*how are you"* is more important than any answer or advice you could possibly give. From the moment of birth until we leave this world, we all need to be seen and we all need to be heard. There is true holiness in those moments of connection, of caring, of love, of community.

Over the next 25 hours we, along with synagogues around the world, will come together, mostly in person, in the largest numbers of the year and power down. Sitting together, people of all ages, interests, political views and musical tastes engaged in the same activity in the same space for a significant length of time. How unusual is that outside of a sporting event or a major rock concert? During the day we will all be reading from the same books and not our smartphones or Kindles, and follow the same service, and hopefully be on the same page. The mystical tune of Kol Nidre has already pierced our hearts in unison.

If that is not enough, tomorrow we will chant from a scroll that was written by hand in a manner that is thousands of years old. This day is a luddite paradise.

Finally, many, if not most, of us will share the same caffeine headache around 11 am tomorrow, discuss the challenges of the fast that we are all experiencing together in

some detail and wait expectantly to hear the ancient sound of the Tekiah Gedolah at 7:14 pm. It is the ultimate communal event. When in our computerized, AI generated world does such a thing happen? Where can you be part of a community to be together and see each other in person. In shul, that's where! And not only today. We're open year-round.

In closing I want to tell you a story which I am sure that I have told before. A long time ago, on March 17, 1976, I was interviewed for Rabbinical School and not surprisingly they asked me why I wanted to be a Rabbi. I, of course, knew what the Rabbis and scholars sitting across from me wanted to hear.

That I wanted to study Torah, that I wanted to study the Rabbinic works, and our philosophers, understand our history and culture. To do scholarship and teach. All things that I truly wanted to do at the Jewish Theological Seminary. But that is not how I answered.

I told them that the reason that I wanted to be a Rabbi was to have the opportunity to help build a Jewish community. And to their credit, they admitted me. I want to thank you for allowing me to join you in building this magnificent community, which is so alive, so vibrant, and varied. Truly a center for Jewish life.

Every Shabbat I delight in walking into the community hall during Kiddush lunch and looking at the hundreds of people, young and old, a true cross section in every way engaged in the power of a Kehillah, a community: talking, laughing and seeing each other *panim el panim*. Such moments are so important and so rare in our world.

Finally, I thank you for the privilege of being part of your lives and your families. Together we have discovered the power, the relevance, the wisdom, and the deep religious meaning in our tradition. In times of joy and in times of sadness you have allowed me to be present. At the birth of your children, at your B'nai Mitzvah, at your weddings and milestones. At the harder moments as well. During times of illness, you have allowed me to hold your hand and pray, to say the *Shmah* with your loved ones and participate in their funerals, helping to shape the memory of them. I like to think that we have found strength, compassion and empathy looking to each other's faces and at times even experienced God's presence as well. It has been my privilege to know you *panim el panim.* I am a living example of the fact that sometimes dreams do come true.

Gmar Hatima Tova!

May we all be written for the good. May we live lives worthy of God's blessings by creating a world where we face one another *panim el panim.*