

Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5764

"Here I come, ready or not"

A childhood friend of mine said to me recently that she loves High Holy Days, "It's like a vacation without having to pack or travel." I knew the comparison couldn't be entirely accurate or else my mother, may her memory be for a blessing, who hated packing but liked vacations, would have loved High Holy Days. I can't quite remember which my mother gave up first - was it High Holy Day services or was it traveling? The real truth is that she would have kept doing both if she could have taken her own bed with her. Anyway... When first I heard my friend's comment, I smiled, thinking to myself vacation is not exactly how I, as a congregational rabbi, think of High Holy Days, or the days leading up to them for that matter. Nonetheless, I'm always delighted when people tell me they love something about Judaism. And then I started thinking a little more about the comment.

When I think of vacation, I think of people wanting to get away from the community they live in - place and people. But the Days of Awe are the opposite of that - it's the time we come together in the biggest numbers, the time when the whole community is here, and each of us is in the midst of it. When I think of vacation, I think of people wanting to read books for fun, not necessarily for intellectual and spiritual stimulation, but the reading lists for the Days of Awe are among the most intellectually and spiritually stimulating of any reading we do.

When I think of vacation, I think of people wanting to indulge physical desires - eating unusual foods, going to museums and movies and theatre, making love, getting out into the fresh air: swimming, snorkeling, sailing, walking, biking, hiking, mountain climbing. I had a professor in graduate school who used to remind us that vacation was for vacating - leave your mind alone for a while, he used to say to us 24/7 students. Stop thinking so much.

Well, 10 days from now we'll be fasting - so unusual foods is not what I tend to think about during these days. If anything, the delicious foods of Rosh Hashanah are old and familiar, comfort foods even.

And the Days of Awe don't call for a lot of physical exercise. Okay, we stand up and sit down a lot, bow and bend a little, occasionally take a few steps forward or back, and if you want on Yom Kippur afternoon our friend Corey will lead you through some yoga poses, but in general - you get my point - we're here deliberately gathered in a room together, not off wandering alone on the mountainside. But then I began to see the similarities of vacation and the Days of Awe.

How many of you have connected or reconnected to your own heart while on a vacation? It might come in the form of connecting hearts with someone else - as on a honeymoon perhaps, or even a vacation fling, or meeting a future spouse on vacation - but maybe it's also just getting centered while you're away, coming back to yourself, listening to your heart. How many of you have ever gone on vacation and while away - getting a little distance on situations and relationships - made a life-changing decision: to leave a job, to go back to school, to change careers, to move, to leave a relationship or commit to one, something life changing? It's amazing what giving oneself a little space in time and place can do, isn't it? And it's amazing how you can be standing elbow to elbow in a sanctuary for a few hours at a time, on and off for ten days or so, and slowly or suddenly discover things about yourself, about life, about the world, about others, maybe even about God, that you never knew before.

My brother and I lost yet another one of our dear relatives a few weeks ago - our mother's sister, our Aunt Bege. The trouble with having so many relatives live into their late 80s and 90s (Bege was 95) is you get kind of used to having them around. Some of you remember Bege from Tracy's and my wedding 8 years ago - right here in this room. I was recently remembering the time I went over to Aunt Bege's house to come out to her. She was easy. I've thought so for a long time, she said. You have? I said, like since when? When you were a kid maybe, but at least since you came home from your freshman year at college. I was a little surprised. Both that she knew long before I did! and also that she hadn't said anything along the way -- Bege wasn't usually reticent when it came to expressing her opinions. Why didn't you tell me? [I guess I was thinking she could have saved me a lot of trouble!] She shrugged. It seemed like something you ought to figure out for yourself, she said. She went on to say, though, that it was one of the reasons she had made sure I knew her fondness for some other lesbian cousins in our family - she wanted me to know it was alright with her.

It's often that way, isn't it? Not that my Aunt Bege wasn't a remarkable person - indeed she was. But doesn't it often turn out that the things we think are concealed turn out to be well known - sometimes even to others well before they're known to us?

One of the lesser known names for this Holy day of Rosh Hashanah is also my favorite -- Yom ha-Keiseh. Day of concealment. It comes from a translation of a verse from Psalm 81 [v. 4] that is part of the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah: Sound the shofar at the covered time of the month for our feast day. The Talmud tells us that this verse must refer to Rosh Hashanah because it is the only holy day on which the moon is covered, the only one that falls on a new moon [RH 8a-b, just as the page changes]. The midrash plays some with this verse and this idea. It says that God is hidden when Rosh Hashanah begins, and the sounding of the shofar, and our returning to God, draws God out. By Yom Kippur on the 10th of the month, some say by Sukkot at the full moon, God is ready to receive us -- no longer in hiding, we and God return to each other. Some reverse the story -- it is

not God, but we who are in hiding when Rosh Hashanah begins, and first the shofar, and then God, draw us out over the next few days, so that by the end of Yom Kippur, or some say by Sukkot at the full moon, we can embrace God, our own true selves and souls fully revealed. We have come out of hiding.

It's a sweet image - God, each of us, drawing one another out of hiding. It's also very telling about us, about human beings in general. We do hide a lot; we do conceal things from ourselves, from each other, from God. And long ago our sages, our tradition, recognized that that's not a healthy way to live our lives. And so methods were devised and taught and practiced on how to come out - how to see each other and ourselves, how to speak to one another about difficult matters, how to apologize and make amends for wrongs done, which allows us then to set aside our fears, which in turn allows us to come out of hiding, for isn't it usually fear that makes us hide in the first place? Fear of being found out. Fear of being rejected for being who we are. I guess Rosh Hashanah was really the first "national coming out day."

Jewish tradition offers two other explanations about why Rosh Hashanah sometimes came to be called Yom HaKeiseh, the Day of Concealment: The first says that on RH the People of Israel diminish themselves and conceal their own goodness so in awe are we of the Day of Judgment. That's a tricky one, conceal our goodness when our life hangs in the balance of that goodness? But indeed, there may be a tendency in these days of tshuvah, of repentance and self-examination, to commit the wrong of "false humility," which is, after all, a kind of arrogance. Remember the old old joke (it must be about #5 on the Jewish joke list) about the Rabbi, Cantor and Temple President praying fervently before the open ark on Yom Kippur? Each of them exclaiming over and over: "I have sinned; I am nothing; please forgive me." Soon the shammes (caretaker), moved by their prayers, joins them in front of the ark. Beating his chest and exclaiming along with them, "I have sinned; I am nothing; please forgive me." At which point the rabbi elbows the president and whispers, "look who thinks he's nothing." [My parents loved that joke!]

The sin of false humility may be a source of humor, but it is also a sin of arrogance. Similarly, the wrong of too much self-criticism, to the point of berating oneself is also a kind of arrogance and also conceals our true selves. The tradition of Cheshbon hanefesh, the instruction to take an accounting of our own soul at this time of the year, does not instruct us to beat ourselves up endlessly, nor to pose as something we are not, but simply, to try to make an honest assessment of ourselves and our sins, not to wallow in them, but in order to do something about them: to ask forgiveness, to try to make amends where possible, to resolve not to make the same mistakes again. In order to become a better person.

Don't diminish yourself in these days by hiding yourself, or by pretending to be who you are not - either better or worse. Don't conceal your true self.

Yet another explanation for why Rosh Hashanah is sometimes called Yom HaKeiseh, Day of Concealment, tells us that on Rosh Hashanah God conceals our sins and forgives them. Another tender picture of God, isn't it? God sweeping our deepest darkest wrongs under the rug. Gentle, thoughtful, loving God, this One who conceals our sins and forgives them even at the moment we're trying our hardest to reveal them.

The 12th c. scholar Maimonides lists 24 sins that "hold back" tshuva, repentance [in Hilchot Teshuva, chapter 4]. I won't read them tonight, but suffice it say that as one reads them, each of us knows we've committed sins and errors on this list. Are we to give up then and assume that God has it in for us? Not so, says Maimonides at the 11th hour - well, at the end of the chapter anyway: "Though all of the above hold back repentance," he writes, "they do not prevent it entirely, for 'Nothing can stand in the way of teshuva.' Rather, if a person truly repents from them, this person is a master of teshuva (ba'al tshuva) and has a portion in the world to come, la'olam ha-ba." [translation by Rabbi Benay Lappe] No matter what, says our tradition, if you truly repent, if you sincerely seek out God, God wants to be found.

My family lost a matriarch, but as a family, we're not dying out quite yet. A bunch of toddler cousins arrived at the shiva for Aunt Bege. The old ones of us who had grown up playing in her house, smiled and cried to see yet another generation run laughing through her beautiful home. At one point the kids were playing hide and seek. And I happened upon two of them just as one found the other. They were squealing with delight, grabbing each other's hands and jumping up and down laughing. It reminded me that the fun part of the game is the finding, not the seeking - it is the reunion that brings the laughter and delight.

There is a Chasidic story told of Rabbi Baruch whose grandson Yechiel came crying to him one day. It seems Yechiel and a friend had been playing hide and seek, but when Yechiel managed to find a very clever hiding place, his impatient friend simply abandoned him and went home. As his grandson told him what happened, Rabbi Baruch's eyes too filled with tears, "God says the same thing, my child: 'I hide, but no one wants to seek Me!'" [in Reaching for Holiness, a study guide for S'lichot, the High Holy Days, and Sukkot, UAHC, 2003, p.15] Even for God, it is not the hiding, but rather the embrace when one is found that brings delight.

In Jewish tradition there are times to hide: Purim, for example, even makes a word play on our hero's name: Esther also means "hidden one," for she remained closeted as a Jew until it was time to reveal her full identity and save her people. And perhaps in celebration of that necessary closeting, on Purim we all dress up in costume - deliberately hiding. But on Rosh Hashanah, while we may clean up nicely, we don't wear costumes, we don't pretend to be someone, something we are not. In fact, just the opposite -- on Rosh Hashanah and the

days that follow, our task is to come out, to reveal our deepest selves to ourselves, to the people in our lives, to God. Taking off our masks, however, exposing our true selves can sometimes leave us feeling too vulnerable, so we need to watch out for each other when this is the case: ki-tireh arom v'kiseto

"when you see the naked, cover them" [Isa. 58.7], instructs God in a verse from Isaiah found in the Haftarah we'll read on Yom Kippur morning. Followed by: "And do not hide yourself from your own kin." hitalam - a different word for "hiding". Hiding yourself is not only about shirking responsibility; or not helping someone else in need; it's also about closeting yourself. "And do not hide yourself from your own flesh." Do not hide who you are from your own family, or your own self. We think of hiding as a way to keep others from noticing us, from seeing who we really are. Or maybe, as in the game of hide and seek, it's really about hoping someone will notice us, will find us. Maybe that someone is God, or a lover, or a mother or a father, maybe that someone is one's own self.

ki-tireh arom v'kiseto

"when you see the naked, cover them" [Isa. 58.7]

"And do not hide yourself from your own flesh."

During the Days of Awe God has taken this instruction to heart: on RH God takes the naked - us -- exposed by our own self-accounting, made vulnerable just by virtue of our presence here, our return home -- God takes us and gently covers us by concealing our sins and forgiving us. Thus we no longer need to hide our selves. or hide from our selves. It is a stunningly beautiful scenario that our tradition has constructed for us. It is a life saving scenario declaring that it is never too late to change, that growth is possible, that Judaism tells us a good life, a full life, a Jewish life is a life in which all of us ongoingly reveal ourselves to ourselves and to others, including God, and - masks lowered -embrace the very human beings and the very loving God whose hearts, like ours, have now been revealed.

You know that feeling of the first night of vacation, when all the precious days stretch out before you like a glorious rainbow, and you don't have to do anything (providing of course that you really did manage to clear your desk before you left town). So you know that feeling? the one that comes before you remember how time flies and before you know it it's the last night of vacation? Well, that wonderful feeling - that's what tonight offers - for tonight is the first night - and the 10 Days of Awe spread luxuriously before us inviting us to remove our masks, come out of hiding, embrace one another and God.

Shabbat shalom, shana tova u'metukha. May it be a good year, a sweet year, a year of peace in our hearts and in our world.