

Second Life: Avatars and Imagination
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5770
September 19, 2009

It was the question you either dreaded or dreamed of, on the first day back at school. Do you remember that annual autumnal exercise of recounting what you did during summer vacation? Where'd you go, what'd you see, who were you with? Chore or cherished memory to share the fading remnants of a freedom fast slipping away, nevertheless it seems that so many of the insights of fall, indeed, of this High Holy Day season begin with the words "this past summer." Perhaps it is because getting away, or changing the flow of the day, offers not only different experiences, but also altered reflections on the reality of our most-of-the-time lives. That time away from the everyday may be brief and short in length, but it is often deep, and long in intensity.

This past summer, we had one wonderfully weird evening in Wellfleet. I'm not sure I can relate this well without naming names, but it struck me so powerfully that I'm going to try. Sitting for dinner at the summer home of a friend of ours, a member of this congregation with whose permission I tell this story, we were reflecting on events back home, and he mentioned someone we both knew. "I haven't been in touch with him lately," I replied, but I mentioned someone else, a man who has impressed me, and I knew had worked closely with our friend. I may have said something like I'd be happy to get to know him better, or

something like that, and our host raised his eyebrow, smiled, and said: “How about in a half hour? He’s getting a few people together just down the road.”

So off we go, to a bonfire on a beach, and we find this man I had met maybe two or three times before. In addition to other positions, he teaches at a local law school, the one my wife attended. So when Julie met him they spoke about the school, its expanded facilities, and its current conditions. Julie admitted that she didn’t know many of the new people, but shared one name, that of her favorite professor. The man on the beach looks at her for a moment, and then says: “Stay right here. She’ll be here in ten minutes.”

My friends, I’m well aware that this may be one of those you-had-to-be-there moments. I’m not sure I can do justice, here and now, to the astonishment I felt that night. It’s not as if we mentioned dozens of people in conversation. No, two names. That was it. Just two names came out of our lips. Neither of whom we had any clue was anywhere within 500 miles of where we were that night. And both... both of them materialize in person, within a matter of minutes.

Had we caught on quickly enough, had we recognized the magic moment for what it was, we both would have said “President Obama” next. Alas, the moment passed. Turns out he was a few miles down the road, a few days later.

The British author Doris Lessing once wrote: “coincidences are God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

I don’t... I don’t know what to make of a night like that. I don’t necessarily believe that it was somehow all meant to be in a pre-planned, predetermined way. Unromantic as this may sound, I am what you might call a *b’shert*-skeptic, “b’shert” being the Yiddish term for “it was meant to be” and often used to refer to your life-partner.

But maybe there is a kind of karma out there, even if it was not somehow all set up in advance. There are moments that just feel meaningful, times when we take the random pearls and raw oysters of experience, and string them into beads of beauty. We craft coherence out of the “stuff” of life.

If so, what is real, and what is artifice? What is natural, and what the byproduct or dreamt-up offspring of the children of the mind? Where, indeed, is the boundary between “image” and “is”?

Years ago Julie and I had a subscription series of what we thought were fantastic seats to the Miami Ballet. They were in the second row. Close up. A great view.

Too good, as it turned out. We could see the stage, and we could see the lights. And we could see the dancers sweat. A reminder, at a moment when the suspension of disbelief would have probably been preferable: those are real people, right in front of us.

Do you remember watching a movie or a play, the first time you realized that the actors were real people, with their own lives? Or that an actor and actress kissing each other on stage or screen were often married... but not to each other.

Maybe our modern technology pushes the question even further. I remember, growing up, my fascination with Dungeons and Dragons, a role-playing game in which each participant took on a character with strengths, weaknesses and individual attributes. Or Zork, the first on-line interactive world, which opens with the information that “You are standing in an open field, west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.” Sitting at a keyboard, you typed in instructions, from opening the mailbox and reading its contents, to taking up a sword or a clove of garlic, and exploring the caves and streams, the glittering treasures and glowering monsters which lie below the house.

Now the interaction between reality and fantasy grows thinner still. The first time I heard of “Second Life” I thought it was some born-again fundamentalist group. I was wrong. It’s not that at all. It is an incredibly complex online world, inhabited by avatars of your own invention, which can own land, buy clothes, hear concerts, hold meetings, listen to university classes, and interact with each other. There are tours of real museums, clubs for a variety of interests, and even a model of the Western Wall, and a functioning synagogue or two in

what only appears at first glance to be an imaginary experience. I understand that Second Life may be passé already, but I... frankly I just heard of it for the first time fairly recently. I read that some ultra-Orthodox Jews are creating scantily clad avatars and doing all kinds of things in Second Life between their characters and cooperative co-inhabitants of this alternate time-tempting soul-draining society, things which would be, well, beyond the bounds of modesty, and not within the norms of halacha, of Jewish law, in the real world.

So I ask the obvious question: can you be held accountable, for something an alter-ego does? Where are the boundaries of play, and fantasy, and art? Is it not, somehow, really you lurking there, whatever the outward mask, as long as you are pulling the strings, typing the keys, controlling the movement, thinking the thoughts? Is all this exploration a harmless outlet for human foibles and anti-social tendencies, or a more real-than reality, true-to-who-you-are no-one watching window on the soul?

Imagine, though, and perhaps more to the point: if we can reinvent and project an image of ourselves so profoundly out into the metaverse, the cyberspace around us... if we can conjure up a character through the force of will and the power of the mind, what might we do within ourselves? If we can do this, what else might we do?

Think about it. With such creative power, such a flair for crafting and creating meaning... with a persona open before us to shape like clay in a potter's hands... can we not use this power of reinvention... as a new chance, and a fresh start, in our actual day to day lives? Can we not bring such energy and focus to the time we spend in what was recently dubbed the "reality-based community?"

A story, perhaps even one which is true. A United States Army Chaplain during the Vietnam War reached a young soldier just before the man died on the battlefield. It was evident from the wounds that the man did not have much time left. As he held the man's hand, the chaplain tried to console the soldier as best he could. "Son," he said, "is there anything I can do for you?"

"Not really," the wounded soldier replied. But as the memories of his life flashed before his eyes, the young man added. "Sir, what I need now is someone who can undo some things for me."

Young or old, wounded or whole, the moment comes when we stand before the mirror. What do we see, and what do we wish for? Last night, during the late service, I asked about your Jewish identity. Today, the question is not about community, but character. How are you, really? Where do you stand in your own eyes? Who are you, in comparison... with who you want to be?

Self-help books line the shelves of stores, with varying themes... and a similar promise. The path you want is in your hands! Learn optimism, channel worry, grow to know the inner you! Some are about diet, and some exercise; some are about relationships and others about work, but so many... so many of them simply open us up... to the inner power... of the mental reframe. *Imagine* yourself whole, *think* differently, *see yourself* anew...and results will follow.

They're right. And they're valuable. But they're not the only books of wisdom out there to learn from.

“*Ki teitzei lamilchamah al oyvecha,*” we read recently in the book of Deuteronomy, in one of the Torah portions of late summer, “when you go forth to war against your enemy, and Adonai your God delivers your enemy into your hand, and you capture your enemy...” These are the opening words of one of the most puzzling and... maybe, possibly... one of the most progressive laws in the Torah. It is the law of the captive woman, who, once taken, must be given a month in your home, to shave her hair, trim her nails, and have time to mourn her parents whom you have supposedly just slain... before you can forcibly marry her.

A distasteful business, all of it. Hard to deal with, difficult to fathom. Why is *this* in the Torah? What does this have to do with our lives? And how is this at all progressive?

Well, it depends on the intent, and what the common practice in other places might have been at the time. A month to wait before forcibly marrying her? Consider it not merely a matter of compassion for the captive. It is also a cooling off period for the hot-blooded soldier, a disincentive, a reminder of responsibility and consequence, as well as opportunity and conquest.

But we are not the first interpreters in Jewish history who have had some... trouble relating to this passage. Imagine the world-view of a late 16th, early 17th century medieval mystic, born in Prague and practicing in Poland, named Isaiah ben Abraham HaLevi Horowitz. Pushed from place to place, dealing with exile and persecution, homelessness and helplessness, this early Kabbalist, author of work called *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*, the Two Tablets of the Covenant, probably could not have easily imagined a situation of Jews in power, and Jews triumphant. The physical force described in these words was as far away and alien to him as another planet.

But Rabbi Horowitz shared something with all religiously connected Jews before and after his time, no matter how liberal, or how traditional. Not matter whether we take the words of the Torah *literally* or not, if we take them *seriously* then we share a pre-commitment to their spiritual meaningfulness, and potential usefulness. This means that these words must be able to speak to us, and live through us –

whether the events described actually happened in the way they are described, or not.

With no military experience, with no physical analog of Jewish power in the world he knew, how did Abraham HaLevi Horowitz bring these words into his life? He re-imagined them. He spiritualized them altogether. He sent forth an internal avatar. He saw this as a psychic struggle, as a battle... against the evil impulse.

Here is Rabbi Horowitz' recasting of this passage, with my own commentary embedded within his words:

“When you go out to battle against your enemy” – this means when you challenge the evil impulse within you to battle. “And Adonai your God delivers the enemy into your hands” – this means that when we come to purify ourselves, when we struggle to do the right thing, Heaven helps us. The Holy One is there for us. The universe itself supports our struggle towards goodness and growth and God. And even more than that: “you take your enemy captive” – which means that the captive the evil impulse has captured by tricking you, you take them back. All the sins that are in your hand, you turn into merits, as our sages, may their memory be a blessing, have taught: “Great is *teshuvah*, repentance, for through it sins are transformed into merits.”

Thus does this mystical reimagining of the words of the Torah... allow for a liberating reimagination... of the content of our character, and the deeds of our lives.

What we teach, what we come together for this season is the hope, the possibility, indeed, the promise... that in the loving embrace of one another and our God we are not trapped by the trippings of our past. We are not merely who we were. We are also defined, no matter how late the hour in our lives, by who we can still become.

The shofar calls, not merely an alarm, to wake us up from yesterday's dream. It is a call to the present, the great gift... of the new day, which begins... even now.

Go forth against the greatest of odds, the inner enemy that holds us back in habits of the past. Only you... can define... what holds, and what sets free. Only you can imagine... the person you are yet to be. A new act, a fresh start, a second life, a second chance... to be the authors of ourselves.

L'shanah Tovah.