

Before Whom You Stand
Yom Kippur Morning 5755
October 4, 2014

Opening images, from the first episode of that great television program *West Wing*. Rapid-sequence scenes of different people, in a variety of settings. I don't remember all the details but I think one is listening to a lecture, a second is jogging alone, a third is not standing and is... not alone. One by one, at what we understand is the exact same moment, each of them hears a sound, looks at a pager, reads a message, mutters something, and hurries off.

I thought about that scene this past summer when, in the midst of all kinds of other activities, at restaurants and coffee shops, at tourist spots or in daily life, alerts would sound, cell phones would go off simultaneously. People would pull out their phones, stare into the small screen, absorb the news about another attack.

Instead of hurrying off, though, here, now, the first reaction was often verbal. Someone would swear, or cry, or curse. And all of a sudden, of course, everyone's an expert! Right along with the expletives and exclamations, fully formed policy recommendations came spilling out from everyone's lips. Often, someone would propose a course of action that, let's just say, no one would actually want to carry out. Thank God... thank God, I think, that our first reaction... is not always our final action. But maybe... maybe there is a lesson here, in the gap between the two.

In the morning service, in the daily liturgy, is found a short but powerful personal prayer. *“L’olam y’hai Adam y’rai shamayim baseiter u’vagalui. U’modeh al HaEmet, v’doveir Emet bil’vavo;* at all times should a person revere God in private, and in public, acknowledge truth out loud... and speak it in one’s heart.”

These are very spiritual words, to me. They remind me of a passage from the book of Exodus, where, during the construction of the Tabernacle, the poles which were used to transport the portable Sanctuary were to be covered with gold on the outside...and on the inside.

The outside, sure, easy to understand. But the inside? Look, no one is ever... it’s the inside of a pole! No one will know! No one will ever see it! Why? What’s the purpose of that?

Gold on the inside, as well as the out. It is to show, our tradition teaches, that we are supposed to conduct ourselves in our inner life... in the same way we act outside. There is supposed to be harmony – and high standards – for our conduct in private, as well as in public. The question is not just the gold that other people see, but, too, how shine the secret places?

This is a very high standard! This is a great goal. These words are clearly aspirational. They would be the sign of high character and deep moral accomplishment.

But I have a confession to make. I suppose it is the right day to do it. My confession is this: I am not a Vulcan. Sometimes I think with my heart, before I feel with my head. Sometimes my first thought when I hear something is not the last word I want to say on the subject! On hearing about bombs and attacks, there were times when *the first words out of my mouth*, or on a better day maybe just the first thought that entered my head... were not ones I would stand up in front of you and say. And certainly not something I would repeat to a reporter. It was mine because it came from somewhere inside me. It was a dark and frightened place, but it was still me. So I have to own it. But I would be... ashamed to say... some of my first and unfiltered thoughts.

Sometimes, then, there is a gap between what we feel, and what we show. And my friends, on this Day of Atonement, on this day of coming clean and reaching high, I want to say that this is a very... interesting distinction.

Look, maybe all of you are pure of heart, and never say anything in the heat of the moment that you would not really say if you thought about it more. In which case, that's great, and I'm glad, and I owe you twenty minutes.

Whether this hits home for you or not, one more word of preamble. Usually I am, I would say, profoundly attached to sincerity. There was a computer term from the early days of Windows and MACs that I remember well and value highly still: WYSIWG. "What you see is what you get." To conduct oneself, to communicate, to simply "be" in a straightforward way, without

layers of guile and a different persona depending on where you are and who you are with... I strive for this, and I respond well to it in others.

But there are those times when the heart and the hand are not in sync, when what we really think and what we do are not the same. There is an internal check, a realization that “I can’t actually say that.” When this happens, this is, I think, a very important moment. Something really interesting is going on here.

Because, why not? What is it, which gives us pause? Who is stopping us? Indeed, who is it that is sitting on our shoulder, and whispering caution in our ear?

Behind me, on this bimah...is a phrase which is found on many an ark in synagogues around the world. “*Da Lif’nei Mi Atta Omeid; Know Before Whom You Stand.*”

The origin of the phrase is unclear. It appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot – but in the plural form. There, as Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, a group of his disciples went to visit him.

They said to him: Master, teach us the paths of life so that we may attain life in the world to come. He said to them: Be solicitous concerning the honor of your colleagues. Keep your children from meditation, and set them at the feet of scholars. [Not sure what the first part of that one means, although Rashi had some interesting things to say about it.] And when you pray, *da lifnei mi atem om’dim*; know before whom you are standing. In this way you will win a place in the world to come.

A one-time rabbi of this congregation, Barry Schwartz, recently wrote about the fact that the words do not say “know *what* you stand for,” but, rather, “before *whom* you stand.” In my words now, this is not about inquiry or abstract positions, but about connection, and relationship. Philosophers of the purely rational mind might wish differently, but we don’t take positions in a vacuum. No matter what the first thought that may come into our minds may be, responsibility requires a sense that we are... responding. That we think through how this will be heard, how it will come across, in real life, to people we care about...and even to those we have not met and do not know.

The words can be taken literally, of course. The following story took place not too far from here. One day, Justice John Paul Stevens is on his way to work, but is, for some reason, out front, on the street, towards the public entrance of the Supreme Court. A group of tourists with a camera saw him – and asked him to move out of the way, so they could get a better picture of the building. Had they known before whom they stood, they might have had a very different kind of experience – and a deeper one than just the pixels on a page.

But here, now, this is what those words mean to me. It is not only about this place, and a sense of the sacred. And it is not only about the inner recesses of the heart. It is also about the impact we will have.

It is that when we stand up to say something in public, we remember that what we say *matters*. That words have an effect. That we have a responsibility. That there are eyes upon us, even through the veil of time.

The first question I have for you, this morning of Yom Kippur, is this: who are the ones before whom you stand? Who are your role models, the ones standing on your shoulder. Who is it, when you make a decision, or take a stand, that you are trying to live up to? Yes, of course, it's supposed to be a reference to God. "Every move you make, every step you take..." But it is not just God, I think, whose standards and expectations we internalize.

Is it a parent, or a teacher? Was it a mentor, or a friend? Are they with us still, or have they moved on, watching you in some more mysterious way, from a more permanent place?

I think of my own teachers, those who inspired me and served as my mentors. I know that, when I have made hard choices as a rabbi, especially, indeed, not when I have followed but when I have departed from their path, when I have made changes from what my teachers had done, I had to, somehow, look them in the eye, and tell them why.

As a father, as a husband, as a man, sometimes what I do is not just about what someone else wants, or even what I want, but a juggling act, a balance, and a sense that I am answering to something, somehow, beyond that very moment.

In one of my favorite lines from *I, Claudius*, Derek Jacobi sits before a group of Roman Senators, with the Praetorian Guard behind him. “I shall appear at the next session of the Senate,” he says, “where you may confirm me in my position or not as you wish. But if it pleases you not to, explain your reasons to them, not to me.”

Who is that them, for you? To whom do you feel you need to explain yourself? Whose gaze is on you, when the lights are out and you are all alone? By choice, or by chance, who are your role models?

And my second question: who stands before you? Who looks up to you? Who looks to you, to set a standard, to lay down the rules, to generate a sense of purpose and expectation? For whom are you a model?

How are you handling being in such a position? Is there pride, or disappointment, in the eyes of those who look up to you?

It would be wonderful if all of us were transparent and sincere, with clean hands and a pure heart. And it would be an amazing world if we lived in a full alignment between the emotional and more rational aspects of ourselves, if there were no conflict at all between the id and the superego. Indeed. But that is not our world. And there is no shame in saying so.

***Da Lifnei Mi Atta Omed.* To know before whom we stand does not mean that we are perfect. It means, rather, that we must strive to live up to something... beyond the instant instincts of our lower selves. It means working hard... to be better than we otherwise might have been.**

There are many similarities among the Abrahamic traditions, the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A deep study continues to reveal ways in which the similarities have been overlooked, and an understanding of one tradition often enhances respect for another. And, although loyal sons and daughters of one tradition, all of us can nevertheless often appreciate how a different faith handles some questions.

But there, are, of course, important differences as well. One the biggest differences between Judaism and Christianity has to do with the nature of human beings. In Christianity, as I understand it, and as an oversimplification of a complex doctrine, we are born flawed, out of sin, and in need of God's grace to achieve salvation. Many Jews know that our tradition does not believe this, and they therefore – erroneously – conclude that we must teach what seems the opposite: that we are born... inherently good. In fact, though, the opposite of having a particular nature is not leaning the other way, as it were, but, rather, having no inherent nature at all. Jewish tradition teaches that we are born a *tabla rasa*, a blank slate – with impulses, instincts, inclinations... two of them. There is an inclination to do good, and an inclination to do bad. I conclude, this morning, with a tale about one of those impulses.

In Tractate Yoma, we find one of the strangest stories in the entire Talmud. A group of rabbis are frustrated with the state of the world, and want to do something about it. They set out in search of a ... permanent solution to the problems that plague the planet. And so they attempt to... capture the *yetzer ha'ra*, the impulse to do evil. And, because they are a group of very big deal rabbis, they actually...succeed in doing so. At least that part of their plan works. They capture the evil impulse, and they put it in a leaden jar, and keep it there for three days. But the next morning they went out to get breakfast and discovered that... no eggs had been laid, anywhere in the land. Another source is more expansive: in the time that the evil impulse was hidden away, no buildings were built, no enterprises begun, no babies were conceived.

Somewhere inside, buried deep or close to the surface, there is something impure, a dark side in each of us. We're not expected to purge it, to be perfect, to be totally pure. Instead, though, we are asked... to use it, to channel it, to harness it.

To me, the words that are written behind me... they are one of the greatest tools we have... to do just that. “*Da lifnei mi atta omeid; know before whom you stand.*” Thinking about our role models, on earth and in heaven – and knowing, with humility and terror, that we might be a model for someone else ourselves, looking both ways... these words are wings which help us rise, to make the world a better place.

L'shanah Tovah.