

Rabbi Fine
Rosh Hashanah 5770, Day 2

Painting Your Portrait of God

Before I began work at Temple Sinai this summer I talked to a lot of people about my new job – people from Temple Sinai, friends, family and colleagues. I noticed a theme in the wisdom people shared with me about the task ahead.

People told me that I just needed to be myself, and things would work out well. As I took in this message, I began to think more deeply about what people were saying. I began to feel that beneath this simple common wisdom of “just be yourself” there was actually quite a profound teaching that gets to the heart of our spiritual work on Rosh Hashanah.

There is a famous story about the Hasidic master Reb Zusya close to the end of his life. When his students heard that their teacher was about to die, they came to pay him one last visit. Upon entering the room, they were surprised to see him trembling with fear. Why are you afraid of death?” they asked. “In your life, have you not been as righteous as Moses himself?” Reb Zusya answered, “When I stand before the gates of Heaven, I will not be asked, ‘Zusya, why were you not like Moses?’ I will be asked, ‘Zusya, why were you not like Zusya?’”

As we gather here today on Rosh Hashanah, reflecting on our lives, we are blessed with the opportunity to ask ourselves this question before we reach the proverbial Gates of Heaven. *Am I living my life as my truest self?*

We probably each have a vague sense of the answer to this question. But what does it really mean to live as your truest self? How do I know what it means to live fully as Aaron Fine? How do you know what it means to fully live as Michael Lawee? As Robin Dale? As each one of us.

Reb Zusya was expressing an idea deeply rooted in our tradition, that each of us is totally unique.

At the foundation of our Torah is the idea that the human being is made b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image. We have an early Midrash, a commentary, that discusses the question of what this means. The Midrash likens God to a coinmaker who imprints coins.

So too God imprints each of us with His stamp – with the Divine image. But the midrash tells us that God's stamp is different than that of a human coinmaker in an important way – each time God leaves His mark it is different. God never makes the same imprint twice.

Every human being is made in the image of God, yet every human being is utterly unique.

Our Jewish mystical masters teach that this mark of God is none other than a spark of Divinity itself. It is the *neshama*, the soul, that we each are given.

Because each of us is one of a kind, we each have a unique life path as well.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of England, says it as follows.

“Whether we are religious or irreligious, there is something we are called on to do, something no one else can do—not here, not now, not in these circumstances, for this person. Discovering that task is not easy.”

Rosh Hashanah is the time to do the work of rediscovering that task.

To help us do so, today I want to focus our attention on three areas in which each of us is called to do something that no one else can do.

The task begins for each person with one’s own self.

The heart of our life purpose is to bring the particular Divine spark with which we have been imbued with, to fruition in the world.

It is as if God has planted a seed of Divinity in each of us, and it is our job to water that seed, to help it grow, and to bear fruit.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav expressed this idea in a story. Rebbe Nachman was one of the great Hasidic spiritual masters, and towards the end of his short but brilliant life, he began to tell fairy tale-like stories embedded with his deepest Kabbalistic teachings. He hoped in this way to teach things that would otherwise be too difficult to get across to his students. I want to share a very abbreviated version of one of these stories with you.

“Once there was a king. That king had a wise man who was his closest advisor. One day he called the wise man into his chambers and said to him: ‘You see that here in my palace I have a collection of portraits of all the kings of all the countries. But there is one king of whom I have no portrait, and in fact, no one has a portrait of him. He designates himself as a ‘mighty hero, a man of truth, and a humble person.’”

The king continued on in the story describing what he knew about the other king, and then he gave a mission to his advisor -- “I want you to go and fetch me a portrait of that king.”

The tale continues with details of the great and lengthy journey of the wise man in search of the king. He went through many lands until he found the land of the king he sought.

There he met all different types of people and had many adventures as he sought out the king's palace.

As a result of his journey through the kingdom, the wise man came to appreciate the king in a way no one else did, and when he eventually made it to the palace, he began to speak about the greatness of the king. He was brought into the chamber of the king, where the king sat hidden behind a curtain, and he continued to praise him, until finally the king pulled back the curtain saying, "Who is this that knows all the secrets of my kingdom and reveals them all?"

The story concludes: "In that moment the face of the king was revealed. The wise man saw him, painted his portrait, and took it home to his king."

My teacher Rabbi Arthur Green, gives a powerful reading of this story. He points out that something seems to be wrong with this story. He writes, "This is a Jewish story about a king, and everybody knows that in Jewish stories the king is always God. But there are two kings here – the king who is discovered at the end of the tale and the king who sends the wise man on his way in the first place. Which of them is God, and who is the other?"

Rabbi Green answers these questions by saying that in fact in this story, both kings represent God, and that the story is a metaphor for each of our lives. We are each like the king's advisor, the wise person, sent off on our way in the world with a sacred task. We are each given the task of painting a portrait of God during our lives, and then giving it as a gift back to God.

But we are Jews, you may object, we don't make portraits of God! It's one of the 10 commandments, "*lo ta'aseh l'cha pesel v'chol timunah*" -- "you shall not make a graven image." God is too great according to Judaism, to be contained in an image!

Yes, this is true. But the portrait that Rebbe Nachman talks about is not any old painting – in fact is not even a Picasso or a Rembrandt. The portrait is us! The only portrait that can contain God is the fullness of a human being who is made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. The new and unique portrait that God has sent you off to spend your life working on is the masterpiece of yourself.

My grandmother, Jean Segal, had a life long passion for writing poetry. One day after we spent a few hours reading her old poems together, she said to me "a poem is never finished." So too, each of us is an unfinished portrait until the day we leave this world.

Rosh HaShanah is the time to step back from our painting and take a fresh look.

What are the colors and brushes with which we have been shaping our lives this year?

Howard Thurman, civil rights leader, theologian, and a teacher to Martin Luther King once said the following: *"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

Now is the time to ask ourselves :

What are the ways I have spent my time this year that have made me come alive?

What changes in my life would allow me to better nurture my own spirit this year?

Taking care of our personal health and growth isn't selfish, it's the foundation of our ability to care for and love others.

Which brings us to the second area I want to focus our attention on.

Nurturing our own unique spark of Divinity is at the core of our life purpose, but it is not all.

Each of us may be utterly unique, but we are not utterly alone.

The great sage Hillel, is well known for his statement:

Im ein ani li, mi li? U-k'sh'ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, eimatai?

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am just for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

At the core of being human is relationship, and within our relationships we are each uniquely situated to have an impact on the lives of others.

In his book To Heal a Fractured World, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says the following:

"God commands in generalities but calls in particulars... There is an act only we can do, and only at this time, and that is our task. The sum of these tasks is the meaning of our life, the purpose of our existence, the story we are called upon to write."

Each of us must ask ourselves on Rosh Hashanah, what are the unique acts for others that only we can do, the unique moments that are here for us to seize, in order to be responsive and present to the people who we can be there for like no one else.

I was touched in this regard, as were so many people, by one of the stories Ted Kennedy Jr. shared at his father's funeral several weeks ago. He talked about the great impact his father had as a politician, but then he spoke personally about his father as his best friend.

He told a story of when he was 12 years old and had recently lost his leg to bone cancer. There was a heavy snowfall outside, and his father went to the garage and got out a sled and asked Teddy Jr. if he wanted to go sledding down their driveway, which was covered with ice and snow. He went out with his dad, and at the bottom of the hill as he tried to walk with his new artificial leg, he fell on the ice and started to cry, telling his dad "I can't do this, I'll never be able to climb that hill."

Teddy Jr. continued, "And he lifted me in his strong, gentle arms and said something I'll never forget. He said, I know you'll do it, there is nothing you can't do. We're going to climb that hill together, even if it takes us all day. Sure enough, he held me around my waist and we slowly made it to the top, and you know, at age 12 losing a leg pretty much seems like the end of the world, but as I climbed onto his back and we went down the hill that day, I knew he was right. I knew I was going to be okay."

What stayed with me from his eulogy, was that although Kennedy was a man who did big things in the world, he had another pair of shoes that truly no one else could fill, that of a father for his son.

Whether we are a senator or CEO, a clerk or a stay at home parent, each of us has shoes that no one else can fill in our closest relationships. Each of us has tremendous power in our day-to-day lives to have a big impact on the people with whom we spend most of our time.

If you are a parent, how can you be there for your child in a way that no one else can?

If you are a son or daughter, how can you be there for your parent like no one else can?

As a friend, are there people who can turn to you in a way that they can't turn to anyone else?

If you are a spouse or someone's partner, in what ways can only you love and support your life partner?

Maimonides teaches that there are two types of teshuva, of repentance, that we are required to do on Rosh Hashanah: *ben Adam L'Makom*, and *ben Adam l'chavero* -- between a person and God, and between one another.

Our job is not only to nurture and support the growth of our own personal Divine imprint, but also those of the people with whom we share our lives.

Im ein ani li, mi li? U-k'sh'ani l'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo achshav, eimatai?

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am just for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

The third and last sphere I want to suggest today, in which each of us has a unique role to play, is in community. Sharing our gifts needs to go beyond the boundaries of our most intimate relationships.

Before I went to rabbinical school, I spent time working with film and video. One of the most important things I learned from my film work was the power of collaboration. In the biggest project I worked on, I had a vision of a story I wanted to tell. As I joined forces with a cinematographer, a musical director, musicians and actors, I found that the project came to life in a way I simply could never have achieved on my own.

So too each of us has dreams, visions and hopes. Community is the place where we can share these dreams with one another, and collaborate to make them real.

We each probably have a variety of makeshift communities in our lives, made up of people we work with, people we go to school with, people we share hobbies with, groups of families our kids play sports with, people we facebook with.

But in an age when many of us move from place to place numerous times during our lives, we can't count on being deeply rooted in community in the way our ancestors were. Modern communication has allowed us the incredible opportunity to share our lives with people across the globe. But ironically, we sometimes find ourselves less connected to the people we actually live near and have a chance to share our lives with every day.

When I began studying at Oberlin College, I met Rabbi Shimon Brand, the Hillel rabbi on campus, and the person I still consider my rabbi to this day. One day during my first year in college, I shared with Shimon that I wasn't finding a Jewish community that felt like a perfect fit for me. He replied, "Aaron, you don't find community, you build community."

This is especially true in the our own day – to receive the blessings of deeply rooted caring community that are so essential to making our lives meaningful, requires us to be proactive to build such community.

What Shimon was teaching me was that just as each of us has the task of caring for our unique soul, and just as each of us can be there for our loved ones in a way no one else can, so too each of us has a unique contribution to bring to community. This is what a sacred community is about.

You don't find a community that is yours, you make a community yours.

To be a healthy thriving community we need each person's stamp. There are perspectives, passions, talents, and ideas, that only you have to bring to our shared creative endeavour.

In the Talmud, our sages taught: *A person who sees a large group of Israelites together should say, "Blessed be God who discerns secrets," for the mind of each of them is not*

like the mind of any other, nor is the countenance of each of them like the countenance of any other.”¹

This may be a very early version of the joke about two Jews and three opinions – us Jews have so many different opinions that it is apparently a Divine secret how we can gather together in a large group. But I think the Talmud is saying something serious as well. When we come together in community as individuals, with different ideas, different aspirations, and different passions, we make a sum that is greater than our parts.

Since joining our community this summer, I have been invited to be myself here, to let this be a place in which I discover and express my truest self. This is the invitation I want to offer back to each of you this Rosh Hashanah.

I want to end with a story that is similar to the story of Reb Zusya that I began with, in this case about another Chasidic master named Rabbi Bunam.

“The wise Rabbi Bunam once said in old age, when he had already grown blind: ‘I should not like to change places with our father Abraham! What good would it do God if Abraham became like blind Bunam, and blind Bunam became like Abraham? Rather than have this happen, I think I shall try to become a little more myself.’”

My blessing for each of us is that we too use the time of the high holidays to become a little more our selves.

In the year ahead, may we have success in finding and nourishing the unique Divine imprint within us, may we help bring out the Divine spark in those we love, and may we each help build truly sacred community together.

Shanah Tovah u-Metukah.