

Ellul 5779, early September 2019

Dear friends,

Warm greetings! I hope this finds you and your loved ones well. At Pardes Hannah, it is our *minhag*, our custom, to begin each year by meditating on some over-arching theme that might enrich our own spiritual practice, some prompt that might accompany us through our late summers and early falls, through the month of Ellul and the Days of Awe. Over the course of the High Holiday davvenen, members of our community are invited to share a *vort*, a brief insight or teaching in response to the theme—something drawn from their lives, from their insights and yearning, their puzzlement and gratitude, their holy chutzpah and their deeper Not-Knowing.

This year’s theme (*drum roll*) is “**Being Present: Lih’yot Nokhah**—להיות נוכח,” which I like to think of as the ability to say, **Hineni, here am I—not hiding!** (I first heard this formulation from my teacher Sylvia Boorstein, and it has long stayed with me, as a watchword.) *Ashkerah*¹, truly, so much is contained in the phrase, “being present”: *olam u-m’lo’o*, whole worlds! Let me try to unpack a few of its meanings, in the hopes that it may spark your own realizations and insights. I’d love to hear what arises in you.

(1) **Awakening.** Being Present occurs when **we see or hear more vividly, when a veil parts, when we see with new eyes.** It may be a sudden flash or the slow dawning of insight, recalling Jacob’s cry of amazement upon waking from his dream, “YHWH, the One who Is-Was-Will-Be, is in this place and I, I did not know...” (Gen. 28:16) In such moments, it is as though the bottom has dropped out, revealing other, deeper layers of what is. Such realizations are received as *gift*. This awakening may also be part of an intentional, ongoing **practice**, when we remove some of the daily film—the accretion of the habitual—from our eyes. Thus, in the early morning blessings we pray *ha-ma’avir sheinah me-einai u-t’numah me-af’apai*, “Blessed are you, Breathing Spirit of the World, who removes sleep from our eyes and slumber from our eyelids.” This process of “removing the film”—cleansing the lenses of perception—is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process, fit to be experienced time and again, throughout the day. Uttering the blessing is both a reminder—a spur to awareness—and a way of *being-with* (of extending and harvesting) the insights.

While waking can occur *in extremis*, it more frequently occurs when we feel safe enough to be undefended and hence, more vulnerable—**when we are alive to the range of our feelings:** to our fears, our trust, our joy, our longings. Such awakening does not necessarily bring calm or equanimity. I think of the moment when Jacob was about to meet his brother Esau after years of tense separation. Jacob was, the Torah says, “terrified and distressed,” *va-yira lo ya’akov va-yetzer lo* (Gen. 32:8). The medieval commentator Rashi notes that Jacob was “terrified lest he be killed, and distressed lest he kill others.” In heightened awareness, there is room for complexity and paradox, *ellu ve-ellu* (both/and).

1. Modern Israeli Hebrew, from the Arabic. Similar to *ממיש/mammish!*

(2) Another sense of being present, *nokhah*, emerges as we respond to the existential query, the first question posed in Genesis: “**Ayeka,**” **Where are you?** It is the ability to acknowledge where we stand **right now**, not where we were yesterday, or where we aspire to be. It is the clear-eyed ability to call out *mi-sham*, “from there,” *mi-makom she-hu sham*², **from the place where we truly stand at this moment.**

***Hineni*, here am I, not hiding.**

Being Present implies a kind of spiritual proprioception—a 4-worlds GPS³ that registers the coordinates of our being. This ***Hineni***, received in stillness, precedes any move forward. So: what does it mean to speak, cry, sing, breathe, admit⁴ where we truly stand? Sometimes this means holding the presence of absence, that which we are keenly missing. Still, it is not always a disheartening realization. Sometimes we discover that that which we have been carrying as a kind of “curse” is really (also) a blessing. A gift to appreciate, nurture and share. A cosmic joke, in the best possible sense! As the Gerer Rebbe once taught, “Don’t pray for what you don’t have, pray for what you already do have.”⁵

(3) Another layer of being present is to “say” ***Lefanekha*/לפניך**: to be aware of what or who is right **“before you.”**⁶ This stance is **profoundly relational**, as when one is present with another person or being *panim el panim*, Face to Face, I and Thou. It often begins with a moment of **turning to another**, an act that may precede any exchange of words, as the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas taught. It is the steady **not-withholding** of yourself even as you let the other *in*, letting the other have a stake in your life. (This from Martin Buber!) As Buber taught, this relating is not limited to the interpersonal realm. It may include stopping and encountering works of art and culture, or the natural, “more than human”⁷ world—the tomato plant, insect, calico cat or sparrow, or the small pond, its muck holding life and pungent decay. All you have to do is step outside and open your body to the wind rustling through the sunlit maple leaves, the smoky bittersweet of early autumn. It arises from paying attention, stopping the ineluctable *rush forward* to slowly behold what is at hand. This encounter is only deepened as our lips open in prayer or silent blessing, a hushed “thank you,” *modeh ani*.

2. From the hasidic master Moshe Hayyim Efra'im of Sedelikow, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, in his *Degel Mahaneh Efraim, parashat Va-yetze, be-zeh ha-lashon!*

3. These 4 worlds of Kabbalah, ff. the recasting of Reb Zalman z”l, include, Assiyah: the world of embodied being; Yetzirah: the world of relation and feelings; Beri'yah: the world of Big Mind/Intellection; and Atzilut: pure being, in some instances including the non-dual, in which the particle of Self melts into the Source.

4. i.e., to “let in” and acknowledge, מודה.

5. Sefat Emet to *Mattot*: [מה שישנון] הוא שאין חסר לאדם, כי עיקר עבודה שבלב, זו תפילה, הוא שאין חסר לאדם.

6. This is a kind of *Shivvitti*, “I place the Presence of YHWH before me at all times,” Ps. 16:8. Note that *Lefanekha*/לפניך, comes from the Hebrew פנים, Face/Presence. See below.

7. this phrase is from the deep ecologist David Abram

While this beholding can happen on the fly, as we hurtle spin dance through the (God)field, this *lefane^hka* more frequently unfolds when we pause to see. This ability to respond, to note the preciousness of being, brings with it response-ability⁸: the willingness to become more aware of how we flow into or intersect with the world, our speech patterns, our commitments and waiting, our use of time. Our footprint on this earth.

For many of us, these small moments of meeting point to something infinitely larger, to the manifestation of the divine, who both suffuses and transcends our world, *sovev u-memale’ kol almin* (as the kabbalists had it). **Being present opens us to sheer Presence, the welling up of the Shekhinah.** I think of this layered awareness (linking micro- and macrocosm), as I read the words of Lam. 2:19 in a kabbalistic key, שִׁפְכֵי כַמִּים לְבָרַךְ זָכַח פְּנֵי ה'. What does it mean to stand *nokhah p’nei ha-shem*, **in the presence of the One**, face to naked face?

On one level, all creaturely interlocutors—human, arboreal, geological, critterly—are all “**p’nei ha-shem**,” unique faces or *facets* of the One, whose infinitely complex Face, in turn, both includes and transcends this protean diversity.⁹ (In Hebrew, *p’nei ha-shem* can both be read as aspects or faces—in the plural—of the divine, and as the singular Divine Face! Tellingly, the key word for Face, *panim/p’nei*, simultaneously means Presence. Thus, a social reception is *kabbalat panim*, literally, a receiving of the face(s), but also, as the kabbalists knew, an entering into radical Presence!) In each individual “face” or facet, something of the Infinite Face may be glimpsed.

(4) Finally, Being Present broaches the key question, **being present to what or to whom?** Being **present-to** is a kind of **Bearing Witness**, as we discern: What is *doha^q ha-sha’ah*, the need of the hour? This entails *letting go* of certain preconceptions in order to be newly present to hidden cries and new developments. The question opens out: What is the action directive emerging from our seeing? What do we need for a more just society? How do we attend to lead in the water, to separated children? How do we respond to casual cruelty from the highest places? And perhaps more foundationally: in this world where it is so hard to distinguish signal from noise, where so much is happening all-at-once, how do we decide where to focus? With limited energy and abilities, where and how can we best serve?

There is much to hold, as though we were called to be multi-limbed Shiva. How do we, as Jews and planetary citizens, hold competing claims and needs, multiple narratives for right-living? Turning to Israel and Palestine, a matter close to the bone and close to the heart, we might ask: how do we hold the complexity with open eyes and open heart; how do we, despite history, harbor seeds of possibility and refuse to be enemies?

With whom do we make common cause, turn towards? But also: Where do we resist? From what do we turn away? When do we unplug? Where does attention rest...and when does attention rest?

8. In Hebrew two words denoting responsibility each capture an element of this interbeing: *arevut*, implies the intermixing, whereas *aharayut*, denotes the care for the Other, the not-self.

9. See the teachings of Nahman of Breslov and my beloved teacher Art Green for more on this.

And, rippling out yet further, there is that from which we cannot— must not— turn away. We are called upon to bear witness to circumambient Gaia, *Shekhinah* manifest as Earth.¹⁰ To name perhaps the great collective issue of our day, we ask: **What is the cry of the Earth**, our planetary home? Only a deep listening, and a deep being **present** can (perhaps paradoxically) ensure our collective **future**. Out of this listening, action emerges, one rooted in that listening. How to bear witness and become a fierce advocate, a partner, and yes, a lover? To be sure, this lifelong work requires not only bearing witness but sustained analytic thought, scientific experimentation, strategizing, organizing, dreaming, legislating, incentivizing, both technological innovation and massive restraint, unprecedented cooperation, resilience, recalibration, radical humility, and—reserves of hope and humor. And still, and yet—a regular return to the act of **bearing witness**, to hearing the earth’s cry and heartbeat, remains essential. It is an umbilical cord connected to Presence, reminding us what really matters.¹¹

As I reflect on all these levels of Being Present, I think of the words of the American poet, the late Galway Kinnell, in his poem “Prayer”:

Whatever happens. Whatever
what is *is* is what
I want. Only that. But that.

Lih’yot Nokhah. Starting from *what is*...and living forward from that place.

Uleva-sof, and in closing, three clusters of questions that I invite you to consider:

(1) **Naming and sharing**: How have moments of “being present” altered your life, and more specifically, colored the past year? What **stories/instances** of “being present” do you—do we—wish to bring to these Days of Awe? What have been some instances of waking, heightened awareness, of amazement and awe? Of complex awareness: e.g., the simultaneity of life and death, heartbreak and healing? And what are the blessings (even hard-won blessings), there for us to harvest?

(2) What are **key practices** for cultivating “presence,” for regularly removing the film from our eyes? What are our prayers and chants, our asanas and meditations, our sacred texts and our daily walks, our social engagements and our deep rest that nurture and keep alive such awareness?

10. See the writings of Reb Zalman on the relationship between Gaia and *Shekhinah*, as *partzuf* or divine Interface. Zalman suggests that the planet may be approaching the status of noosphere, a kind of complex, evolving and interconnected Consciousness. On the natural world (of which we are a part) as צלם אלהים, “divine image,” see the late 13th cent. mystic, Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, as discussed in David M. Seidenberg’s *Kabbalah and Ecology* (Cambridge, 2016).

11. Here I am thinking of the deep listening of the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4), whose sacred orthography implies עדות/a bearing witness, through the enlarged *Ayin* and *Dalet* (עד/Witness) of its first and last words: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶלֶּהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד. As my friend Irwin Keller put it, “Witness” here implies overcoming separation, a being-*with*. אל תקרי **Witness**, אלא **Withness**.

Might Shabbat, that day of spaciousness and song, conviviality and Rest afford us a sustained (and shared!) opportunity for heightened Presence? And

(3) What are the **action directives** that emerge from the first two points? How can we use these moments of “being present” for good and not for harm, for *tikkun ha-lev ve-tikkun ha-olam*, for healing hearts and healing the world.

Shanah tovah umetukah, may this be a good and sweet year, a year of health and deep connection, in which we find new ways to inscribe the word “***Le-Chayyim—To Life!***” in this, our precious world.

It is good to be on this journey together, Reb Elliot

P.S. Almost forgot! The Hebrew name for this new year 5780 is תש”ף: **TaSHaF**. These three letters make up the root, שתף, SHaTaF, which variously means: **to participate, to share, to partner, and to co-create**. May we find skillful ways to share the work this year, to share sacred moments, insights, burdens and joy. May we be all become, in the words of the Sages¹² שותפות/שותפים לקב”ה במעשה בראשית, partners and co-creators with the Holy One in the work of sustaining and renewing our World. *Ve-nomar*, **AMEN!**

12. talmud bavli Shabbat 119b et al.