

Sermon delivered by Rabbi James A. Gibson, Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Kol Nidre - 5768
“Aligning The Faces”
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When I came back from Israel this summer there was fear of drought. It hadn't rained much in July and August didn't start out with much hope.

Then the rain came. It rained so hard that creeks overflowed, basements flooded and Girty's creek wreaked havoc again on Millvale. Water rushed down the middle of McKnight Road, knocking out power and businesses right and left.

I felt bad for them, but I knew that here in the city of Pittsburgh my water supply was safe. I didn't have to worry about turning the tap in the kitchen sink and having no water.

Then the water main in Oakland broke. I kept turning on the faucet and no water kept not coming out. Not at work, not at home. I went to a restaurant in Squirrel Hill and nobody was making any fresh food. They warmed up an old piece of pizza for me. People stood around not knowing what to do. No washing, no drinking, no nothing. I went to buy some bottled water, but it had emptied out of the stores in a flash, like a water main had burst.

My house was without water only for a day. But you know, it doesn't take a day to realize what it means not to have water. I couldn't help myself. I kept turning the knob, hoping for something to come out. When a drop would form I'd get excited, but then reality would hit. I got nothing. Not even prayer was going to make water come out of that faucet.

A legend from the Zohar, our mystical tradition: Once there was a drought in the land of Israel. The rain, promised to our people in Torah, simply did not fall. People prayed, they fasted, they argued over God's justice.

The Rabbis did not know what to do. So Rabbi Yishai, Rabbi Hizkiah and their band of friends came before Rabbi Shimon. Together, they all went to visit Rabbi Eleazar. When he saw them he greeted them with the words of the Psalm, “Hineh mah tov u-mah na-im shevet a-chim gam ya-chad/Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.” (Ps. 133.1) They looked at him as if he were mad.

The Rabbi explained his greeting. He said: “Gam yachad - In unity. This refers to the holy faces of the Keruvim (or “Cherubim”) that were crafted at the top of the Ark in the Tabernacle. When their faces were turned to one another in love and friendship, it

was well with the world - *mah tov u-mah naim/how good and pleasant*. But when one turns from the other, woe it is with the world.”

“I see you have come because the faces are not aligned with each other. If you have come only for this, then return and repent. I foresee that on this day the face will once more be turned to face.”

For Rabbi Eleazar, repentance means more than feeling bad about something we've done. Repentance is finding a way to turn one face toward the other to make things right. Our tradition teaches that these “faces” are opposites that are the necessary stuff of life: sun and moon, night and day, moist and dry, rough and smooth. Returning, repenting is necessary if we are going to *shevet achim gam yachad/live face to face in unity*.

The Rabbis take great pains in their complex interpretations to align the two faces of the keruvim (“Cherubim”) so they look into each others' eyes again. Only then will the right rain fall to sustain us all.

It is a lovely piece of Jewish mysticism from 800 years ago. If faces are aligned here on earth then the heavenly faces will align and the rain cannot help but fall in its season. It might be easy to dismiss all this as merely lovely rabbinic fluff from an era long gone and far removed from our own.

But we see the lesson, don't we? Tonight is Kol Nidre. If we are honest, we will admit that many of our faces are not in line with one another. Some refuse to look at each other at all. Parents and children look past each other, not just teenagers, but many of us who are older as well. Sometimes it is easier just not to look. Sometimes aligning our faces even for a moment is just too painful, too hard to do.

But true forgiveness on Yom Kippur does not come without aligning our faces; inner and outer, our face and those of the ones we love, our face and those with whom we work, our face and especially those with whom we have not been right.

Our task is not so simple, to engage each other face to face. This is not easy because it requires openness and vulnerability, allowing someone not just to look, but to see our face, to be seen for who we really are. “Aligning the faces” on Kol Nidre means looking deep, taking a chance and showing compassion for each other.

Aligning the faces means looking deeper than we want to.

Years ago I had a friend named Vicki Goldish. I met her when I was 22 and had just moved back to my Minneapolis. She was program director at Hillel, the Jewish student association on campus. A friend had suggested she might help me get a job. I had no idea what I was walking into.

When I got to her office she had two phones up to her head, one of them upside down. She saw, hung up the phones and said, “Who are you!?” I told her and she said, “Come on in and sit down! What can I do for you? Do you want a cookie?”

I told her I was looking for a job as a Youth Group Advisor. She looked at me like I had just given her the last number in the Powerball.

“A youth group advisor?? She smiled a wry smile. “I just left my position at B’nai Emet yesterday...They are looking for a new advisor! They like me! I’ll call them!”

And so I took over her old position and became a youth advisor. But the biggest blessing for me was getting to know this woman Vicki, with her explosion of life and the warm heart under her crazy exterior.

One day I went into her office and she looked pained. She had obviously been crying. She looked up and said, “Oh, Jamie. You sit down there. I need to cry for a while.” And she went back to her crying.

After a while she looked at me and said, “What do you do when you can’t do what you have to do?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

She said “My father is sick. He is going to die. He lives in North Minneapolis, where the old Jews still live. He never made it out to St. Jewish Park” (her scornful name for St. Louis Park, the home of the suburban Jews, including the families of Tom Friedman and Al Franken).

I said, “What’s wrong? You’re saying you can’t face your father because he’s dying? Why not?”

She bristled. “You don’t get it, do you? I’m not crying for him. I’m crying for me!” And she wept and told me her story:

Thirty years ago in 1977 Vicki Goldish, the brashest, brainiest Jewish girl from the old neighborhood, was supposed to go to college, find a career and then a nice Jewish guy to marry. But that was not her path. She knew deep in her heart she was never going to be with any man.

Now, 30 years ago, that was no small thing and you certainly did advertise the fact.

“Are you going to tell your father?” I asked. She looked agonized. “No. I’ve thought about it over and over. I can’t tell him. It will kill him. Let the cancer kill him. I’m not going to do it.”

I said, “I think you should tell him. You should let him know who you really are before you can’t ever tell him. He will still love you. We all love you.”

She exploded. "What do you know about it!? He's an old man. He's got more tzuris than any 10 people I know. And I'm supposed to drop this on him? He asks me every week who I'm dating. He says, "You're 29 years old. You should think about settling down." And I can't even tell him that I have. I am with the most wonderful woman you can imagine, and no, she's not Jewish."

She said, "I have to go look into his eyes while he's in that bed and comfort him, not make him feel worse."

When I saw Vicki at the funeral, she gave me a look of such pain I didn't know what to do. "Did you tell him?" I asked.

"I didn't have to, she said. He already knew. He knew from the moment I looked into his eyes. I was going to try to tell him. But when I started to say something, he shushed me. He said, "Less talk, more look." We looked at each other without a word for more than an hour. I think we shared more love in that hour than in all our years of arguing." I tell this story for Vicki, who taught me how to look deeply.

Vicki showed trust, courage and love but she could not align her face with her father's all by herself. When her father looked back into her eyes, they lived out the verse of the Psalm: "Shevet achim gam yachad," being together, truly together as one.

Aligning the faces sometimes means taking a chance.

This story was told to a colleague of mine:

"Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. When I arrived at 2:30 AM, the building was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, then drive away.

But I had seen too many poor people who depended on cabs as their only transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. The passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I thought.

So I walked to the door and knocked. "Just a minute," answered a frail elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80's stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 40's movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years.

"Would you carry my bag out to the car?" she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to help her. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb.

She kept thanking me for my kindness.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.”

She said, “Oh, you’re such a good boy.”

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?”

“It’s not the shortest way,” I answered.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m on my way to a hospice.” I looked back in my rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening.

“I don’t have any family left,” she said. “Doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and turned off the meter. “What route would you like me to take?” I asked.

For the next two hours we drove through the city and looked at each other through the rear view mirror. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they got married. She had me pull in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

Sometimes she’d ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

At the first hint of the sun, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They had been expecting her, of course...

As I helped her out of the back, she looked up into my eyes. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing.” I said. She looked shocked. “You have to make a living.”

“There are other passengers,” I said.

She looked me full in the face and said, “You gave an old woman a little moment of joy.” I thanked her and squeezed her hand and walked out into the grey, misty sunrise...

I thought then, and still think now, it was one of the most important things I have ever done. Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we are here there is always a chance you will look someone in the face and see the whole person, not just a fragment of a soul. So every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that it is special. Every day, every minute, every breath truly a gift from God.” (as told to Rabbi Jory Long, included in R. Dov Peretz Elkins, Yom Kippur Readings). I tell this story for holy cab drivers who take chances face to face most every day.

Aligning the faces requires caring and honesty.

It means glimpsing a world beyond sight or touch. Face to face, looking into the open space above the Ark of Life, we find essence, beauty, joy, pain and love, but only if we look with honest compassion.

Aligning the faces means looking toward the human soul, not at the remains of dead tissue in museum displays, the bodies that used to be home to souls, bodies that are now shamed for our viewing pleasure.

Aligning the faces does not mean peace at any emotional price. Even the keruvim (“Cherubim”), the creatures defending the Ark have to struggle to hold their gaze. Why would you think it would be easier for us?

Aligning the faces means looking at each other honestly and with care, here and now. It is, as I mentioned at Rosh Hashana, our 20th high holiday season together.

Twenty times I have come before you and asked you to take seriously the challenge of being Jewish in our day, to add your head, your heart, your hand to this task.

Twenty times you and I have together created the extraordinary heights of spirit in this moment of Kol Nidre.

Twenty times many here have simply drifted away after the last shofar call is blown and that although I understand the reasons, I cannot help but be a little sad for your absence.

Aligning our faces means that now, in our 20th year together, I have to admit to you that I am not 34 anymore. There is no lessening of love for you. No, that, if anything, has increased. There is no lessening of desire to lead, teach, sit on the floor with your children or visit you in your homes. It has all grown as we have grown in 20 years from 550 families to 880 this day.

There is no lessening to my desire to participate in endeavors that I love, such as the Jewish Unity Project I have been privileged to lead for the last 7 years, as well as teaching at Chatham and leading interfaith projects in our region.

I have, however, embarked on a new journey. I am working for the next three years in a program to become a Senior Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. This honor, granted to only 27 rabbis in North America, brings together colleagues across the entire spectrum of Judaism, from Orthodox to Reform and beyond to the Renewal movement.

This July I spent my first summer month of study in Jerusalem and will spend July there the next two summers as well. I will also make Israel visits during each winter season for a week. In addition, I am committed to a demanding study program with my colleagues through the miracle of video-conferencing, twenty-two 3-hour sessions each year for the next three years.

As we align our faces I must tell you that I will be attending to some of my personal needs in the next few years in addition to serving you. Intense study and prayer have become a life-giving tonic for me. I hope to share the fruits of learning and insight with you along the way. But I need the time to learn more and do more on my own.

I must honestly admit some of the wonderful things we have done over the years have come at a price. That price has been paid by my family, which has seen a father preach family values from the pulpit at one moment only to be absent from his children's lives at another.

It has meant having a partner, who is a nationally certified professional nursing specialist in her own right, spend many nights alone. My partner, whom I love more than anyone or anything, who has held my heart in her gentle hands since I was 19 and she was 17, has tolerated work taking precedence over life far too many times.

Many of you who devote yourselves to your work and professions might say the same if you would look into the faces of those you love. When we do, we know with painful clarity that too often we have failed to look in their eyes and see their pain, their heart, their need as well as their love and concern.

Aligning our faces means that you and I are going to rearrange our schedule a bit. Rabbi Ende will grow even more in his rabbinic role in our congregation this year. He will be leading more life cycle events and programs. He is leading the Friday night congregation called "Likrat Shabbat" at the 6:00 PM most Fridays. More and more of you look to him for spiritual leadership and guidance, and this is good.

Aligning the faces means that when you are asked by me or our leadership for help in a project or an ongoing commitment, you must know it is because you are needed. Planning programs, sharing needed financial resources or fulfilling your own spiritual need, the time has come for more of you, our family, to help meet the needs of this kehillah ahuvah, or beloved community, as I called us last year.

Aligning the faces requires us to lift up our faces. This last story is for a new hero of mine who lifted my face this summer:

I went with my Hartman fellow students to visit Kibbutz Manara, far north in the Galilee. The kibbutz itself is 45 feet from the Lebanese border. Not 45 miles, not 45 yards, but 45 feet. When we got there we stood on the rocks overlooking into Lebanon, gawping at seeing the laundry on all of the lines of homes just across the way.

There we met Rachel Rabin, sister of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. She has a face that looks as flinty as the stones of her kibbutz. She has no airs, but exudes an aura of authenticity. The story of the nation of Israel is etched in the lines on her face.

She began to speak. I had never seen someone engage 27 people face to face at the same time so fully, so authentically as did Rachel Rabin. Face to face, she spoke the truth of her life and her country as she saw it.

This is my memory of what she said: “I came to this land in hope and with a willingness to work very hard. I was not afraid then. I am not afraid now. In the worst times on the border I have felt fear, but usually for my family and my friends.”

“I am not religious, but I have faith; faith in our people and in our future. We make mistakes; many of them I am sure. But this part of the world is better for our being here. I believe that with all my heart. We came here to build, livnot and to be built, l’hibanot.”

She looked at us, each and every one of us. She held our gaze. And we saw her face and we felt lifted up, even the most jaded skeptic among us. Though strangers an hour before, she met us face to face and lifted us all. This story is for Rachel Rabin, who has the power to align so many different faces.

And so, finally, I ask you this night: With whom do you need to align your face? Whose gaze will lift yours up this Kol Nidre night? Who in your family needs you to look at them honestly, asking forgiveness or granting it? With whom must you exchange glances so that the human rain of tears may fall now, in this, its proper time? Tonight, right now, see them in your mind. Tomorrow, before the gates of Ne’ilah close, align your face with them if you can and they are willing.

The Zohar ends its lesson, saying, “When people improve their ways below...and light returns to the Younger Face, and everything rejoices, everything is whole, blessings abound, compassion is present and all the worlds are filled with joy! And all of this is the process of Teshuvah, that is Repentance.”

Put simply: Aligning our faces in all the right places can bring us all homeward in love. Aligning our faces in all the right places can bring us all homeward in love. You and I. Each of us. All of us. Homeward in love. Homeward in love.