

Panim El Panim: Facing Off for Forgiveness Yom Kippur

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One of the first Broadway musicals I saw, and to this day, still one of my favorites, is *Les Misérables*. The play is based on Victor Hugo's book, in which the author devotes many pages to brilliant character development. This attention to character development is revealed in the stage production, as the audience truly feels the emotion built up in the conflict between the main characters Jean Valjean and Javert. The action scenes, whether a violent battle or a heroic rescue through the underworld of Paris, charge us with much excitement.

And yet, the theme of *Les Mis* that resonates most with me is the transformation of the protagonist. Jean Valjean changes through the power of repentance. The play opens with Valjean on a chain gang, incarcerated as a thief. But four decades later, when another character hears slanderous talk about Valjean, he retorts, "Will you speak of that miserable theft, committed forty years ago, and expiated, as your own newspapers prove, by a whole life of repentance, of self-abnegation and of virtue?" Jean Valjean does *Teshuvah* -- penitence. But how are we to understand the process that he takes?

The answer can be understood from the famous line from the musical: "To love another person is to see the face of God." Listen to the way Victor Hugo describes the inner struggle that takes place inside Valjean's heart and mind: "There is a prospect greater than the sea, and that is the sky; there is a prospect greater than the sky, and it is the human soul... To peer at certain moments into the withdrawn face of a human being in the act of reflection, to see something of what lies beyond their outward silence, is to discern struggle on a grand scale."

To peer into someone's face is to see their soul – their *neshama*. To look into someone's eyes is to really know them. It is only when we can look at someone *Panim el Panim* (face to face) that we can fully achieve true *teshuvah* – repentance. In Kabbalah, equilibrium is the prerequisite state for marital union, "face to face." This is the spiritual state achieved on the month of Tishrei. Once a year, the high priest in ancient Israel would take two goats and cast lots for them (Lev. 16:7,8). One goat would be killed (16:9) and its blood sprinkled on the atonement cover (or "mercy seat") in the Most Holy Place of the temple to make amends for the people's sins (16:15,16). (In the Most Holy Place, the high priest, symbolically, came "face to face" with God.)

In Genesis, our patriarch Jacob names the place in which he encamps and wrestles with the angel "Peniel." Why does he name it Peniel? Because, the Torah teaches, he saw God face to face, and his life was preserved.

Of course, Jacob is not the only biblical figure who has this intimate relationship with God. And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while He spoke with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent. The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another.

In a midrash, we learn that the prophecy of Moses was qualitatively different from that of all the other prophets of the Biblical era. All other prophets perceived God as if they were looking through tinted glass; but Moses perceived God as if through clear glass. What do the rabbis mean by clear glass? *Panim el Panim* – face to face.

Moses wasn't allowed to see God literally face to face in the end, for we are taught that no mere mortal can see the Divine face and live. We can only understand this notion of meeting God face to face as a

metaphor. But, we can see others face to face without being concerned. In fact, it might just improve our life.

While none of us merit the “face time” our patriarch Jacob got with God; and none of us will have the chance to perceived God as if through clear glass like our prophet Moses, we all have the ability to meet other humans face-to-face. The time has come for us to face off with each other. We must look deeply into the countenance of others, and not just take them at face value, but really place value. We are all created b'tzelem Elohim – in the image of God. And yet, as we know, we all look different. We all have starkly different looking faces. We know people by their face. And by their eye color. It's time we get to know their soul by their face too.

There are two types of teshuvah that we are mandated to do during this season of repentance. The first is teshuvah that is bein adam l'makom – that is, between God and us. This is accomplished through prayer and in our private interactions with the Holy One. The second type of teshuvah is bein adam l'chavero – mano el mano if you will – between two friends. It is this endeavor that is more difficult for us to achieve. While, for some, entering into the divine relationship with God is a challenge, but for most, the human-to-human contact can be even more of challenging.

When one has caused harm to another person, whether by stealing from them, by embarrassing them or anything other transgression, then Teshuvah requires that restitution and reconciliation be arranged between the two parties. Before God can forgive the perpetrator, the victim must express forgiveness to the other human.

One must be sincere in their process of repentance and seek to repair the damage done the person, or at least attempt to do so. A person is obligated to ask for forgiveness three times, but hopefully they will be forgiven on the first attempt. If after three refusals, the person is still not offered forgiveness, they no longer are held accountable for that action.

What is the best way to meet someone to whom you ask forgiveness? You must meet them face to face. I recall working in a hospital over a summer as a pastoral chaplain. The first piece of advice we received was to always meet a patient where they are – both literally and metaphorically. Hospital patients are either lying down in bed or sitting in a chair. The chaplain, or any visitor for that matter, must sit down next to the patient. Greet them at eye level – Face to face.

In 1993, I was a participant on a wonderful program for teenagers in the District, called Panim El Panim. This program is a unique educational program designed to stimulate a serious commitment to Jewish values and civic engagement. Panim El Panim had a transformative effect on me, forcing me to think more seriously and maturely about my involvement in social and political issues. And yet, I never thought much about the actual name of the program. That is until a full decade later, when I led a group of teenagers to D.C. for Panim El Panim. It was then that I realized why Panim El Panim.

A major part of the program is “Street Torah.” The teenagers make sandwiches, pack bags of toiletries, and arm themselves with bottles of water and friendly smiles, and go out to the public parks in our nation's capital to meet the homeless. But they don't merely deliver food and necessities to the country's homeless. They meet these men and women face to face. They are introduced to their souls. Panim El Panim.

We don't see others face to face much anymore. We unintentionally hide behind masks. Not just because we often keep our guards up – having too much to hide and wanting to maintain our secrets and our privacy, but because of technology. New communication technology is both a blessing and a curse. In the old days, we would go visit each other more. We would sit in each other's living rooms, look at each other, and engage in dialogue. Today, we fire off e-mails, talk on our cell phones while running errands, and leave impersonal voicemails. I'm very much guilty of this form of communication.

In recent years, the question has even come up about the permissibility of e-mailing others during this time of year, virtually asking their forgiveness. Whether or not this e-teshuvah is legally acceptable or not, it is impersonal and inauthentic. It is a cop out. When we meet others face to face, there is little question as to our intent. When we talk behind the veil of technology, we keep our cards too close to our chest. If you have to resort to technology for this, at the very least use a video phone!

Believe it or not, the most powerful experience in my life was not the birth of my firstborn child. It was actually blessing this new baby boy for the first time on Friday night at the dining room table in our home. As my wife and I blessed him that he should be like Joseph's sons Efrayim and Menasheh, there was not a dry eye in that room. It was the power of looking into his eyes and offering him a blessing that God should always be with him. When we bless our children with Birkat Kohanim, the priestly benediction, we ask that God bless them and protect them. We ask that God lift the divine countenance – God's metaphoric face – to them and be gracious to them. What is our ultimate wish for our children? That God's face shines upon them for a life of peace. In blessing our children, we pray that God will see our children with the divine face – we want God to see us, and those whom we love, the way we must see others. Panim El Panim.

To really seek repentance, we must confront others face to face. This is categorically not an easy thing to do. But we must face up to our sins – to our transgressions. When we meet another human face-to-face, seeking teshuvah, apologizing for our mistakes and our missteps – we will grow, the other person will grow, and our relationship will grow.

"To love another person is to see the face of God," we are taught in Les Mis. Well, I would like to paraphrase that by saying "To see another person's face is to love God." When we confront others face-to-face, in quest for repentance, we display the greatest love for God who created all humans in the divine image. Let us strive to look deep into each other's face during this season of repentance. Let us live Panim El Panim.

G'mar Tov – May you all be inscribed for Life.