



## Rosh Hashanah 2009 - If I am Not Myself: A Single Moment of Illuminated Awareness

Rabbi Sharon Brous



Last month I was asked to speak at a community gathering exploring the moral dimensions of health care reform. Just before I spoke a pastor stood up and called out into the mic, with a perfect mix of prophetic indignation and rock-star moral clarity that made him, for the moment, almost Bono-like: A great rabbi once said: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?* And the crowd, almost entirely non-Jewish, roared in approval. AMEN! HALLELUYAH! *If I am only for myself*, he went on, *what am I?* More cheers... *And if not now*, and here the crowd was so fired up that they were nearly jumping on the dais. Everyone shouted in unison: *if not now, WHEN?*



Sometimes it takes a voice from the outside to illuminate the beauty you hold within. To honor the timelessness of this Torah, and in the hopes that at least some of you will at some point over these holy days shout out an amen or two, Hillel's questions will frame our experience of Yamim Noraim this year. We start, this Rosh Hashannah, with the first question – the foundational question: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me?* If I don't look out for my own interests, who will?



*But really?* You ask... *That's* the message of this Rosh Hashanah? This year, when our country's excess has been exposed to our great shame: when private jets, \$1,200 office trash cans and multi-million dollar bonuses have threatened the viability of our most reputable businesses, when a culture of radical selfishness and Madoffian greed have essentially brought about a collapse of the global economic system?

This year – when we saw great foundations evaporate, non-profit organizations collapse, venerable law firms simply disappear?



This year, when the nations of the world responded to the economic collapse of the west with unprecedented poverty, despair and hunger? In rural Zimbabwe, where the crisis is so severe this year that villagers wrestle with wart hogs over scraps of food, one mother to name her now 2 year old boy, born HIV+, *Godknows*, because “only God knows if he'll live or die.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Los Angeles Times; Dec 3, 2008.



This is the year that we need to learn to be *more* for ourselves?

We ask *im ain ani li mi li* – if I am not for myself, who will be for me this year, because the uncertainty of our times demands a certainty of self.

And because our tradition calls out to us: before we can begin to put the broken pieces of the world together, we need to tend to the broken pieces of our own hearts. Social change only comes from the stubborn and courageous belief that things can be different than they are. And where does that kind of courage come from? From a deeply rooted, if not entirely conscious, belief in humanity, which can only stem from a personal feeling of human adequacy. I matter, and so therefore do you. I hurt, and so I understand your hurt. I remember suffering, and so my heart breaks over your suffering. If I don't honor my own story, my own self, I'll only spend my whole life hindered by the undeveloped self.



So we begin today with the self (but don't worry –this is IKAR -- we'll get to the rest of the world on Yom Kippur...).

We come together today not knowing what the future will hold, but recognizing just how deep is our vulnerability. So let us try together to see if we can bring some light into these extraordinarily turbulent times.



If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

I was walking home from shul last week, stuck that people in our neighborhood seem to be diligently observing the new water restrictions -- and therefore letting their grass die a slow and painful death. As I passed one house I noticed something extraordinary. The majority of the lawn was healthy, but grass in the area immediately surrounding each sprinkler was blotchy, brown and dry. I stared at it for a moment, confounded – wouldn't it seem logical that the part of the grass closest to the sprinkler, the water source, would remain the healthiest, even as the rest of the lawn dried up? But then I realized – sprinklers project water outward, and while these sprinklers were effectively saving the majority of the lawn, the grass closest to the source was damaged to the brink of death.



How much are we, it struck me, like these sprinklers? When resources are limited – which they always are, but now perhaps more than ever – how many of us continue to spread our life sustaining resources out to the far reaches, while leaving ourselves and those closest to us to wither away, unprotected and undernourished? How many take greater care of our clients than our kids? How many dedicate more hours to healing other people than to taking care of ourselves?





*Im ain ani li mi li* – if I don't take care of myself – my body, my spirit, my family, my heart, my community – who will?

But Hillel's words must be more than a call to arms to protect the self.

In the beginning of the Torah, shortly after Adam and Eve taste the forbidden fruit, they hear the sound of God in the garden and, in their terror, "*vayithabeh ha adam v'ishto mipnei hashem elokekha*" (3:8) – they hide themselves from before God.

Full of shame, Adam tries to escape responsibility. But in trying to hide from God, Buber tells us, he succeeds only in hiding from himself.

God calls out: "Ayeka?" – Where are you?

Of course God knows where Adam is, but needs to engage Adam in the process of finding himself.

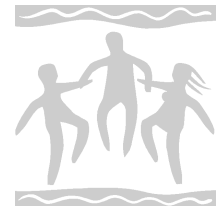
R. Shneur Zalman taught: *In every generation, God calls to every person: 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?'*

This question is designed collapse a person's intricate system of inner hideouts, offers Buber. It is to awaken a person to where she is, and foster within her the desire to get out. This is the question we try to ignore, the question that makes us hide deeply within ourselves. And yet, we ultimately know that "everything now depends on whether we are willing to face the question..."<sup>2</sup>

Adam, to his credit, responds honestly by saying: *I heard You coming and I became afraid – so I hid.*

And in this brutal acknowledgment, this acceptance, he recognizes the ultimate folly of trying to hide from God or from himself. It is in this moment that the rest of his life begins.

*Ayeka* comes not like thunder, but like a still small voice.<sup>3</sup> It penetrates the depths of our souls, persistent, unforgiving. It comes from our children, when they look up at us with sadness when we explain that we have to go away again for another important business trip. It comes from our friends, who no longer seem surprised to see us caught up in the same bad habits. It comes from our partners, who have resigned themselves to being the other ship, passing in the night. It tugs at us from



<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 11, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 13.



the inside, and the fear of hearing even the echo of this question pushes it deeper and deeper inside us. Don't ask me where I am. Just let me keep hiding.

And then September comes – Elul – the beginning of school, the beginning of fall. Everything around us is changing, transitioning, flaunting its ability to grow beyond itself. And we find ourselves back here – in services, attentive for perhaps the first time in a year, or maybe in many years, to the sound of the great timeless question: Ayeka?

Where are you?

Where are you going?

This is your life – what are you *doing* about it?

This is the work of Yamim Noraim – these Days of Awe – awesome for their potential to take us out of our hiding places and awaken us to our truest selves, to remove the obstacles in the way of us being most fully and unapologetically ourselves.

So we start with the self. Are you a person who flows through life, or who hits one obstacle after another? Judaism is a tradition of deep spiritual mobility – what we call in my family making it to the other side of the bump. There are those people in life who – when the plane is full -- always seem to get bumped to first class, and there are those who inevitably run to the bathroom just as their row is boarding and lose their seat to the guy on standby, having to sit in the airport for another 5 hours waiting for the next plane home.

There are those who find their calling at age 7, fall in love with and marry their high school sweethearts, get pregnant the first time they try and make partner by age 27.

Then there are the rest of us.

How do you get to the other side of the bump?

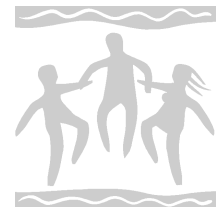
The answer, according to our tradition, is to find a way to live most fully as ourselves. A short while before his death, Rabbi Zusya said: In the world to come I shall not be asked: “Why were you not Moses?” I shall be asked: “Why were you not Zusya?”

What we want, often desperately, is to be like someone else, or to be like everyone else.

What the world needs, even desperately, is for us to be ourselves.

*Im ain ani li mi li?* -- NOT: If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But rather: If I am not *myself*, who will be *me*?





Curtis Sittenfeld wrote of a girl who “could study because she approached her life straightforwardly. But I was living my life sideways. I did not act on what I wanted, I did not say the things I thought, and being so stifled and clamped all the time left me exhausted...”<sup>4</sup>

Why are we so tired so much of the time? Maybe it’s because we are busy living our lives sideways, trying to make work a relationship should have ended years ago, trying to follow through on a career just because it’s what our parents wanted for us. Trying to be Moses, when we really should be fighting with all our strength to be Zusya.



*Im ain ani li mi li?* -- If I spend my life aching to be what I am not, not only will I continue bumping into doorways, but, *who will be me?* Because living sideways doesn’t only hurt us – it depletes the world of the unique and holy light that each person brings into the world.

The Rabbis ask: what is the greatest testament to God’s presence on earth? Look around! See how different every single person in this room is from the person she sits next to. Of the 6 billion people alive today, of all of those who have ever lived and ever will live, there will never be another just like you.



That’s why the Rabbis teach that one who sees a crowd of Israel says "*Barukh hakham harazim*: Blessed is the One who understands secrets." Why is this so? Because no two among them think exactly alike, just as no two look exactly alike.<sup>5</sup>

Only God knows the mysteries of the human heart – the complex combination of fears, hopes, fantasies, dreams that makes each one of us ourselves.

Hillel’s words challenge us to vigorously pursue a path of personal authenticity. To find the hutzpah to believe that the world will be impoverished if I am not me.



What I am doing to discover/ uncover/ awaken myself?  
What is preventing me from fully becoming me?

The work of Yamim Noraim is *heshbon hanefesh* – a rigorous soul accounting. We are tasked to look deeply into ourselves, to be quiet long enough to hear the whisper of our own soul and decipher in that sound who we are supposed to be.

---

<sup>4</sup> Curtis Sittenfeld, *Prep* 2005.

<sup>5</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Brakhot* 58a





Rabbi Ed Feinstein once shared with me a beautiful story told by the Yiddish writer Shalom Asch, about an elderly Jewish couple in Russia forced by the government to house a soldier in their home. They move out of their bedroom, and the young man, all gruffness and glares, moves in with his pack, rifle and bedroll. It's Friday night, and the couple prepares to sit down for Shabbat dinner. The soldier takes his place at the table. Only now is it apparent just how young he is. He sits and stares with wide eyes as the old woman kindles the Shabbas candles. And he listens as the old man chants the kiddush and motzi. He quickly devours the hunk of challah placed before him, and speaking for the first time, he asks for more.



His face is a picture of bewilderment. Something about this scene -- the candles, the chant, the taste of the challah. It touches him in some mysterious way. He rises from his seat at the table, and beckons the old man to follow him, back into the bedroom. He pulls his heavy pack from the floor onto the bed, and begins to pull things out. Uniforms, equipment, ammunition. Until finally, at the very bottom, he pulls out a small velvet bag, tied with a drawstring. "Can you tell me, perhaps, what this is?" he asks the old man, with eyes suddenly gentle and imploring.



The old man, takes the bag in trembling fingers and opens the string. Inside is a child's tallis, a tiny set of tefillin, and small book of Hebrew prayers. "Where did you get this?" he asks the soldier. "I have always had it...I don't remember when..." The old man opens the prayer book, and reads the inscription, his eyes filling with tears: To our son, Yossel, taken from us as a boy, should you ever see your Bar Mitzvah, know that your mama and tata always love you.



Each one of us carries a pack, filled with our lives deepest truths. Year after year, the pack gets heavier and more clumsy. Most of us rarely open the pack, and almost never look inside. Instead we search for heroes, teachers and role models in others. But should you look, there hiding at the bottom is a precious gift given by the One who created you. There at the bottom is your soul. *Your wholeness exists in you already.*<sup>6</sup> Unpack. Reach down. I promise you, it's there waiting.

Some of us have come this year from a place of loss – a lost job, a lost loved one. Some of us come from a place of abundance – in gratitude for the many blessings we have received over the year. The great Slonimer Rebbe teaches that this deep contemplative work is equally critical in moments of illuminated clarity, as it is in moments of difficulty and confusion. The guiding question of our lives must be: "What does God require of me *right now*?"<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> See Remen, Rachel Naomi, *Kitchen Table*, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Netivot Shalom, Awareness, ch. 6.



Yes, the uncertainty of our times demands a certainty of self.

Because, try as we may, we can't ultimately control everything. In an instant a diagnosis, a cutback, an accident, a break-up, could awaken us to life's radical unpredictability. In reality, just about all we *can* control is who we are and how fully we're living.



A single moment of illuminated awareness, Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin taught us, is worth more than all the wealth of the world. It is time for us to collapse the walls of our inner hideouts and exhale, to laugh and to cry, to sing without embarrassment, to love and to let ourselves be loved. To dig deep and pull out of our pack the full glory of self.

The world awaits us.

*Ayeka?*



Shana tova.

