

Is This Real? Yom Kippur 5781 Rav Lisa

I, maybe like many of you, have had moments, even a string of a few days, that felt perhaps like they weren't really happening over the last 6 months.

Is the connection real if it's on Zoom?

Is it real if I cleared off one corner of my room and the rest of my space is a mess
Is this work meeting real if I don't change out of my pajamas?

Many have even wondered if the pandemic itself, or at least the risks of getting sick, are real. Of course we know this is very real. Sometimes it's hard to admit. But when things are hard to see, both in difficult times and in wonderful times, it is particularly human to ask - is this real?

Yom Kippur, if nothing else, is a day unlike any other during the year. We are told in the Torah to afflict ourselves- the sages enumerate those details in 5 ways- refrain from eating and drinking, from wearing leather shoes, from sex, from bathing for pleasure, and anointing. We confess our sins, both publicly and communally, as well as personally, internally. These are rituals reminding us of our mortality- the stark reality between life and death. It's strange and intense on purpose.

We might ask ourselves about this day too- is this real? What are we doing on Yom Kippur anyway?

In the book, *This Is Real And You are Completely Unprepared*- which is a guide to this holiday season, Rabbi Alan Lew addresses this idea in a beautiful way. He teaches that "*Ritual is meant to make the invisible visible.*" This is the kind of real I mean - Highlighting the experiential more than the construct it lives in.

For example: Grades aren't real. Learning is.

Yom Kippur is an excellent example of this understanding of ritual. In fact, the rituals of Yom Kippur ask us that question- what is real in our lives? Does what you see and what you do reflect the reality you want?

What does Yom Kippur seek to make visible that is invisible? Each of us needs to answer this question for ourselves each year as it relates to the internal process.

We might think that with the litany of sins we confess, repeating that confession up to 5 times over the course of the 25 hours of Yom Kippur

But on a closer look, Yom Kippur seeks to make inconsistency more visible- in service of living a life of connection and integrity. Perfection is not real, but forgiveness is.

It's about honesty. We often get caught up in the naming of sin, in the beating ourselves up, or in the denial of sin, the unwillingness to face it. Certainly, when things in the world around us are so incredibly broken and difficult, it might be

harder to see what to do next. And you might not think Forgiveness is at the core of all of this.

Forgiveness gets a bad rap sometimes I think. Mostly that's because we haven't normalized the process of change- of admitting we have done something wrong, learning more and committing to acting differently. Forgiveness is so powerful it is the thing Yom Kippur shows is we desire most from God, and from others. We think forgiveness is about condoning behavior, of letting it go, of assuming it didn't matter or was insignificant. This is not how Judaism understands forgiveness.

In fact, the process by which we confess sins, starting with the most insignificant with Kol Nidre, and moving to the most specific with the Al Chet, and repeating the same list multiple times over, perhaps is about making visible our resistance to admitting our shortcomings, or even our resistance to change. And yet, we simply cannot move forward without this honesty. Forgiveness just gives us the room to actually do the work of change.

Sarah Hurwitz writes about the Torah's examples of forgiveness in her book *Here All Along*, which has the world's best subtitle: Finding meaning, spirituality and a deeper connection to Life- in Judaism... after finally choosing to look there. Really encapsulates the honesty I'm talking about here and I love the book because it is genuine.

In talking about teshuva, she states: "I want to be clear that "clean slate" is not synonymous with "the slate you had before you committed the sin." Rather, it is more like the account in the Torah of how, after the golden calf incident, Moses became so enraged that he smashed the stone tablets on which God had inscribed the 10 commandments. He then hiked back up Mount Sinai and begged God to forgive the Israelites. God eventually did so, and God and Moses created a new set of tablets. Jewish tradition has it that Moses returned with these new tablets on Yom Kippur. And the Talmud claims that the Israelites saved the broken pieces of the old tablets, placing them alongside the new ones in the Ark at the heart of the tabernacle, and carrying those shards with them on their journey through the desert.

I love that the Israelites seemed to believe that those shattered pieces were also somehow holy and necessary for the process of teshuvah. This has been the case in my own life as well."

How do we bring the brokenness with us without letting it consume us? Through forgiveness, and honest reflection, through the recognition that this is the constant process of meaning making in our lives.

God wants us to believe in our own process of change and in our own power. Forgiveness is the mechanism by which we make this idea visible. The rabbis really wanted us to believe in Forgiveness, and in the process of change. So much so that they emphasize this at the moment our most egregious sin against

God - the Golden calf. And we can move on from that moment. Usually working through something, being specific and not shying away from our own responsibility in the painful pieces - that can give us new energy to commit again to the things that matter most. Even if the original wrong is not something we individually did, bigger than us, but still something we want to change, what is being illuminated in this ritual about how to do that?

So if what's invisible is hope, let's use Yom Kippur to make that visible.
If what's invisible is agency, let us remind ourselves of where we hold accountability.

If what is invisible is Justice, Yom Kippur comes to remind us of our responsibility
If what's invisible is connection, the model of God's unwavering compassion comes to say: you matter.

We know we did some things wrong. We know the world around us is full of pain and brokenness. And yet, we are more than our shortcomings. Thank God we have another year to do more.

What needs to become visible to you this Yom Kippur?