



“Hidden in Plain Sight”
Yom Kippur Sermon
Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe
September 26, 2012/10 Tishrei, 5773

My two-year-old daughter Shoshana loves Dora the Explorer. Her favorite book is *Where's Boots*, in which Dora asks us to help her find her best friend, Boots the Monkey. We look at the park, the beach, and the garden. Finally we find Boots up a tree eating bananas. But anyone who knows Dora knows the trick. On every page you have to look out for Swiper the Fox. Swiper is ready to run away with whatever's important at that moment, but all you have to do to stop him is say, “Swiper, no swiping!” It seems easy, but it's not, because Swiper is very hard for Shoshie to spot. Every time we turn the page he's there, with his bright yellow tail and crazy grin. He might be peeking behind a tree, or he might be in full view, front and center. It doesn't seem to make a difference. Every time, Shoshie looks right past him. Of course, what we see in our children, we never have to look far to see in ourselves. Swiper the Fox is a reminder of the tendency we all share to miss the obvious. He is all the things we forget to look at, the things we don't pay attention to, and sometimes, the things we might not want to see. Swiper represents the things in our lives that are hidden in plain sight.

The human mind is wired to miss the most obvious things. Think about it: we need a coach to tell us over and over that the key to hitting the ball is to look at it; half the time, to our own detriment, we fail to notice when our loved one changes their hair. For me, with my mediocre sense of direction, I get nervous if anyone tries to reassure me, “You can't miss it.” I need perfect directions. I need large signs and a voice that tells me, loudly, that I have arrived at my destination.

In tomorrow morning's Torah reading, Moses' message is aimed at this basic human weakness. He's afraid that amid the hundreds of commandments, the people will miss the main point. He says, “Surely, this instruction which I enjoin you today is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it? Neither is it beyond the sea... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.”



Like a frustrated parent, shouting that the glasses we are searching for are sitting on our face, Moses is trying to help us focus on those things that are hidden in plain sight.

Today, through looking together at three Jewish texts, I would like to explore this theme with you – a theme which I believe to be central, not only to the High Holidays, but to Judaism as a whole.

The first text is a fascinating blessing from the morning service. It is called the *Asher Yatzar*, because after the basic words of Jewish blessing, it praises God, “*Asher yatzar et ha’adam b’chochmah*, who formed the human body with skill, creating its many pathways and openings. It is well known before Your throne of glory that if one of them be wrongly opened or closed, it would be impossible to endure and stand before you.” I choose this blessing among the hundreds of others in Jewish tradition, because it points out that mindboggling miracle that is always there, ongoing and unnoticed by every one of us: the miracle that our bodies function, almost without incident, minute after minute, day after day.

Many of us will look at our bodies and wish our hair were different, or we were taller, but when was the last time you thanked your body for taking you for a run or for getting you where you needed to go? We’re not supposed to be thinking about this when we run down the court and jump for the basket, when we steer our car with our children in the back, or when we sit at the computer typing a letter, but the ability of our bodies to function is the most basic miracle crying out to be noticed. The sensation of hunger from fasting on Yom Kippur might help us see it, and when something goes wrong, we are all too aware, but Judaism reminds us that even when we’re feeling good, we have to take note of the unbelievable system of tubes, passages, and moving parts that keep us alive and give us pleasure: the physical and emotional response of listening to a beautiful piano concerto or a love song; the sensation of the touch of a hand; the pleasure of sleep, which I am sure many of *you* are familiar with even if at the moment I am not; and the reliability of waking up.

Blessing is the essence of Jewish prayer. It slows us down and allows us to see what’s really there. But Abraham Joshua Heschel tells us it does more than that. A blessing helps us achieve what Heschel calls awe, “an act of insight into meaning greater than ourselves.” Upon getting dressed, we praise God, who clothes the naked; when we open our eyes in the morning, we thank God, who opens the eyes of



the blind. Before we go to sleep, the Hashkiveinu prayer ends with a blessing over God, who spreads a shelter of peace over us, over our people Israel, and over Jerusalem. And, when we wake up, the Yotzer Or blessing expresses thanks not only for a beautiful morning, but for forming light and creating darkness, making peace and creating everything there is. There are similar blessings for getting good news, seeing a rainbow, and even – for us DC area residents – for seeing a head of state.

The goal of the blessing is to open our eyes to the world around us and give us a glimpse of how we really fit in. These insights are all in front of us, but most of the time, they remain hidden in plain sight. Imagine what it would feel like if you actually had the opportunity to do this: if you learned one new blessing – one of the ones I mentioned or another from our tradition – and incorporated it into your day.

A year ago, my sons Aaron and Jonah were three months old. We could set them on their backs on the living room floor and walk away without a thought. A year later, when I walk in the door at the end of the day, I often don't even get to change my clothes. I'm busy catching little hands before they poke little eyes, changing diapers, kissing boobos, cleaning milk up off the carpet. I don't usually give much thought to how much things have changed in a year. But when Jaimee and I do stop to think, we realize, actually, what an accomplishment it is that we and the boys have come this far. The boys have been somewhat delayed in getting up and walking, and the truth is it has taken a great deal of effort to create this crazy scene I come home to every day. I am grateful and proud that Jonah and Aaron can now stand up and sit down, cruise along a piece of furniture and crawl on their hands and knees.

This brings me to the second text I want to share with you. It's a statement, in Deuteronomy, that the biblical Israelite is commanded to make in sacrificing his first fruits after arriving in the Land of Israel. This statement isn't to thank God for his crops or recount the Exodus and the miracles God performed for the people. In this statement, the Israelite is to say, "I declare that I have arrived at the land that God promised our father Abraham." After 40 years of wandering, the Israelites have finally made it, and in the midst of his harvest and all its rituals, this farmer is told to stop and recognize what he has accomplished. He is no longer a nomad, traveling the wilderness and fed with manna. He is a farmer, with land, and crops and a home for his family.

This is part of what the High Holidays are for. They are not only for us to consider how we have come up short in the last year and make amends. Our Days of Awe are not complete if we don't spend some of them acknowledging and appreciating what we've accomplished and what we have done well. What positive changes have you made this year that, if you don't notice them, and even speak them aloud, will stay hidden, right in front of your face? What were your concerns last year on Yom Kippur that are no longer worries? What challenges have you faced and made progress in overcoming? There is always so much pressure to move on to the next thing, but Yom Kippur can help us remember to ask ourselves these questions. Maybe you've met a personal or professional goal, improved an important relationship, or broken a bad habit. Perhaps you've planned a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration or celebrated your 70th birthday. Maybe you've made it through a difficult time, dealt with a significant loss and come out at least on your feet, or a relationship has ended and you have begun to adjust. Sometimes just getting through it is an accomplishment in itself. But many times, we don't realize the great things we have done, unless we're lucky enough that someone points it out to us, and even then, we often don't really hear it. Take a lesson from the Israelite who has reached the Holy Land, and declare your accomplishments out loud.

A good photography course might be frustrating at first to the average amateur. It won't start with lenses and gadgets. The first thing a good teacher will tell you is that you have to relearn how to see. Our mind has become so accustomed to how we see the world that we always look for the same things in an image, and we miss the rest. A recent study found that artists use their eyes differently than other people. While the average person was found to focus on the central objects in a picture more of the time, the artist spends more time looking around and taking it all in. Art teachers will often suggest closing one eye when looking at a scene you are about to sketch, to force yourself to notice the angles and shadows that your mind would otherwise fill in automatically. In fact, researchers think that Rembrandt's abilities might have been aided by a common condition we sometimes call a wandering eye, which results in stereoblind vision. They believe this condition might have forced Rembrandt to look more closely at what was in front of him.

Our third text is the story of Balaam, a bizarre and comical passage from the book of Numbers. Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet,

is hired by one of Israel's enemies to travel to a hilltop overlooking the Israelite camp, and curse them. He sets out, riding his donkey, and at a certain point, an angel of God appears and blocks their way. Balaam doesn't see the angel. He looks ahead and sees only the path in front of him. But the donkey sees, and she swerves away from the road. Balaam brings her back. They continue on, and two more times, the angel blocks the road. The donkey stops. Balaam hits her in frustration. Finally, the donkey opens her mouth and speaks. She reminds Balaam that they are old friends, and he has trusted her all these years. Then, suddenly, Balaam sees the angel, standing there, sword in hand. Now realizing his error, he jumps to the ground and bows down.

There are things in our lives that we might not see, no matter how long we look. We've forgotten they're there, or we've grown used to not seeing them through years of practice. And then, when we search, or when we listen to a trusted friend, we see it there in front of us.

Every High Holy Days, we sit in the service. We throw pieces of bread in the water on Rosh Hashanah afternoon. We try to reflect during the silent confession. But so often, year after year, we mutter the same words and phrases. Our minds go through the same lists of personal transgressions as last year, and the year before. What else is there that we are not aware of, or that we don't let ourselves see? Are we missing opportunities for our own growth and happiness? Have we forgotten to be attentive to our loved ones, ask them what they need, or how their day was? Perhaps we have mistaken something small they told us for something unimportant, or we didn't push ourselves hard enough to see things from their point of view.

We may think of ourselves as the nicest people. We may even dedicate much of our lives to helping others. And we still may be blind to some aspects of how we affect the people in our lives, what we mean to them, and what our loved ones need from us. What if we could suddenly see clearly things we had spent years failing to notice? Ways in which we are holding ourselves back, or unknowingly neglecting those who are closest to us? What would we see if we shut one eye and looked more closely? If we asked the right questions and listened to the answers? Today, let's take the time to notice, really notice, what is right in front of us, calling out for us to see.