

Yom Kippur 5787 - The Power of the Mind's Eye

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You may be surprised to learn that I went to college to study biology. Eventually, I found my way to the Religious Studies Department, but long before I imagined myself sitting in front of a Talmud, I saw myself surrounded by microscopes and test tubes. Even after I caught the "theology bug," I earned my spending money working nights in an immunology lab. I'm confessing - I've been living a double life — rabbi by day, science nerd by night.

Perhaps this is most evident in the podcasts I like – maybe you know some of them: *The Rest is Science*, *Hidden Brain*, *Science Verses?* I love the cells, and the brain, and the DNA – all of it. Science is so miraculous to me that in many ways it leads me to my most spiritual feelings and beliefs.

A few months ago, I was on a walk listening to an episode of *Hidden Brain* that was so riveting, I hustled home to actually take notes and begin what would be an extensive exploration of an entirely new topic for me - one where I could feel the science part of my brain and the rabbi part of my brain melding. A topic, even more a practice or a tool that may be the linchpin to our work today and the launchpad of our lives tomorrow. (*I imagine you are all sitting on the edge of your seats.....*) The subject of this episode was the Mind's Eye!

You know this idea already. If I were to ask you to close your eyes (*don't worry, I won't*) and imagine an apple, you would summon your mind's eye and likely see a red apple, maybe on a table or a plate, some of you may just see a sketch and a very few of you, less than 4%, would not see anything at all (*that, I promise, will be another sermon.*) Of course, like you, I know about this cerebral activity, but that podcast taught me something even more extraordinary.

Now, let's say I ask you to close your eyes (*don't worry I still won't...*) and this time imagine yourself staring into the sun. It's bright, maybe you are trying not to turn away. Here's the astonishing thing: while you're doing this, sitting right here, indoors, with your

eyes closed, your pupils are constricting — just as they would if you were actually outside, squinting into blinding sunlight. And if instead I asked you to imagine walking into a dark room, your pupils would widen, they would dilate, exactly as they would in real life. I am intrigued by this. The pupil is not a muscle we can control at will, the way we decide, for example, to make a fist. And yet the mind's eye is so powerful that it can move it, even change it.

That is what I want to talk about today. Not pupils, exactly — the mind's eye, and what it turns out to be capable of: the amazing ability to influence and shape our bodies so that we respond, physically, to things we are not actually experiencing. I would even say: we can change and be changed simply by the images we create in our minds.

Today, I want to bring this idea of the power of the mind's eye, into two realms. The first relates to each of us, individually, privately, personally, as we do the work of *Teshuvah* - atonement, forgiveness and apology. The second goes wider, relating to all of us, collectively, as together we, along with our greater Jewish community, confront the next unwritten page in our tradition's Book of Life. For all this work, in both of these realms, the mind's eye is key! It isn't a metaphor; it is a powerful mechanism to fulfill our best and better selves in the coming year and years.

Let's begin in the personal, in the work we are doing individually and privately today, our own Yom Kippur. Speaking for myself, as this heavy observance drew closer, I've focused mostly on apology. You see, I am hoping to hear an apology from someone, an apology which I realize I may not receive. Like many hurts we have experienced, I'm holding a lot as I wait. I also know that some people may be waiting for an apology from me. This weighs on me too. I have a lot of emotion around stepping up to the task.

Returning to the scenario with our pupils, I see helpful guidance here. The fact that imagining something produces a response is indeed fascinating. But what is even more remarkable to me is that the response to something intangible, something that exists only in the private theater of our mind, is not only physical but it is also physiologically correct.

That response is the same reaction the body would have produced had the image been tangible, real.

At some point, during my exploration of this phenomenon, I realized, *and here is the wisdom for Yom Kippur*, that if this can happen with the eye, it can also happen with the heart. Might it be possible if I or if you, if we closed our eyes and imagined the person who owes us an apology...there they stand in front of us, we know how tall they are and that jacket they always wear, and we can hear their familiar voice saying the words: *I was wrong, I understand I hurt you, I am sorry* – if we could do this, might it be possible for us to experience some physiological change? To stop clenching our jaw when they walk in the room, to let go of some anger, or make space for a deeper breath? The effectiveness of the mind's eye doesn't require the other person's cooperation. If I can imagine the apology I need, might it be possible that the next time I see this person, I will be more open, less defensive; my body more relaxed, my heart calmer?

Of course, the same practice works in reverse. What if we picture ourselves as the ones who must apologize. Not the edited, dignified version — the real one, each of us standing in front of the person we hurt, saying the actual words. *I messed up. I'm sorry. I see what I did to you.*

Long before anyone had a scientific name for "visualization", many understood that the mind can be used to rehearse what we will later perform. A basketball player who imagines the free throw, muscle by muscle, statistically makes more baskets. The person who imagines the apology, word by word, is more likely to survive actually giving it. The mind's eye is not a substitute for the real conversation – nothing is. But it can be the practice room where we create valuable muscle memory. It is where we go to fail privately, to adjust, and try again, so that when we arrive at the real doorway, we are a little less tongue-tied, less tense and fully present.

Today is a long day, with lots of time for reflection - your thoughts wander away from the prayerbook, or the music opens space to just think. Consider this truth: When you can

picture something, when an image vividly inhabits your mind, you begin, perhaps quietly but powerfully, to live differently in the present.ⁱ

Let's widen the lens now, from the personal Yom Kippur each of us is having today, to the collective Yom Kippur that our entire Jewish community is experiencing this year. Here too the mind's eye can be a most valuable instrument in contending with the past and more – imagining and practicing for the future.

All of us are all too well aware that this is a very hard time to be a part of the Jewish community. In so many ways the landscape of our lives has been disrupted. Antisemitism, which many of us assumed was mostly our grandparent's story is now our story – resurfacing in ways that are frightening and disorienting. There are also tectonic shifts within our community. We can no longer take the nature of our relationship with Israel for granted. Zionism, non-Zionism, post-Zionism, anti-Zionism – are all part of an increasingly complex and varied Jewish community. We are being reshaped by forces we didn't choose, and it's fair, on this day of honesty, to admit that we are unsettled. Never in our lifetimes has it been less clear what the next page in our metaphoric 'Book of Life' will look like. Never in our lifetimes has it been more critical for our collective mind's eye to find a new focal point, a point beyond what is in our immediate field of view.

The author of the Book of Proverbs, who lived over two thousand years ago in a world with its own troubles and complexities, understood this as we must. Looking backwards to the earliest years of the Jewish people and forward towards an imagined future where prophets, scholars, and even prime ministers would lead us through hard times he said:

בְּאֵין חָזוֹן יִפְרָע עָם – “Without vision, a people unravels.”ⁱⁱ Not – a people is conquered or displaced or defeated. Without vision, a people unravels – from the inside.

A community, like an individual, has a mind's eye and what we picture there, about who we are and who we want to be, will shape our collective being, physiologically and practically, as we move into an uncertain future. I know, this feels ominous, daunting, maybe even more overwhelming than that apology we know we must offer ...soon!

But this work, this tool, this capacity, it turns out, is in us, in our DNA. We are a people shaped again and again by historic uncertainty, and every time, what carries us through isn't the strength of our defenses. It is the vibrancy of our imagination and the clarity of our vision.

The examples are plentiful.

Our Joseph in Egypt. He didn't just see a famine coming — he pictured a way through it, and in sharing that vision, helped shift an entire society's mindset toward safety and plenty.

Our Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who, as the Romans were crushing Jerusalem and the Temple along with it, imagined a Judaism born of an entirely new paradigm. Smuggled out of the burning city, he procured an audience with the Roman general. He did not ask to save the Temple. Instead, he requested a small town and the scholars who lived there. “Give me Yavneh and its sages.” From that act of imagination, rabbinic Judaism was born — the tradition of Torah study and prayer you and I inherited. He didn't picture replicating what had been. He pictured what would rise after it. That's the Judaism we are living today.

Our Emma Lazarus, who during a time when pogroms sent waves of Jewish refugees toward American shores, pictured something almost no one else did — a nation whose true face was a welcoming light for the tired, the poor, the ones with nowhere else to go. Her words now sit engraved on the Statue of Liberty. She pictured that responsibility for America before the country had fully pictured it for itself.

Let me offer one last example, about us, this congregation, and how we got to this very place. It's about how the earliest members of this congregation used that same power of vision, like Joseph, Yochanan and Emma Lazarus, to create something new, bold and great.

In 1963, just one year after TRS was established, the community had the chance to buy the 7 acres of land we are sitting on right now. It was a big commitment to an unknown

future for Northern Virginia Jews that about 100 families felt responsible for. There was a meeting, and of course a vote. 55% of the members supported buying this land. Although this was officially a yes, Rabbi Berkowits and then president, Ira Funston, decided that it wasn't a sufficient mandate to go forward. They didn't buy the land.

But 9 couples had a vision of us, you and me, here. They could see it in their mind's eye and so they went ahead and privately bought the land. They told the rabbi and the president that they would hold the land until the congregation was ready and then they would sell the land to the membership at cost. With this vision offered to our fledgling congregation, their vision of themselves began to change and in just one year, with a unanimous vote, the congregation bought the land that was being held for them. And that's how we got here, our Temple, nestled in this gentle, lovely hollow - our beautiful, busy, thriving community, which now over 1800 families call their sacred home.

It's true that when something vividly inhabits our imagination, we begin, perhaps quietly but powerfully, to live differently in the present. Joseph, Yochanan, Emma and those 9 families so clearly demonstrate that a picture held closely enough, long enough, stops being wishful and starts being load-bearing, real.

The mind's eye is not a metaphor. It is a mechanism — a linchpin for the personal, a launchpad for the communal, and it's the quiet engine of this day's work as we step toward a new year.

So let us begin close in. Somewhere in your memory is the person to whom you owe an apology, or the one you're still waiting to hear from. Sit with that today — their face, the words you'd want said, or the words you're afraid to say. Something in you may shift just from picturing it honestly. Let it. Give yourself and the coming year a head start.

But this day is not only private. We are part of a larger whole, and today our entire Jewish community is doing its own reckoning. We cannot wait passively for someone else to draw the map into an uncertain future. We must imagine it ourselves — together, even out loud.

Nine families once staked their savings on a vision others couldn't yet see. Let's be that bold again.

Not a Judaism that merely outlasts a hard season, but one that grows — in curiosity, in joy, in generosity, in the courage to welcome, rather than only to brace. It is always easier to picture what we're guarding against than what we're building toward.

I won't pretend the antisemitism is imaginary, or that we agree on Israel, or that the path is obvious. None of that is true. But underneath it all sits a question worth asking: once we are through this, what will we have become? A community smaller and warier than the one we inherited or one still expanding?

Jewish identity has never been static. It is one long act of reinterpretation, each generation picturing what the last one couldn't. Now is simply our turn.

בְּאֵין חֲזוֹן יִפְרֹעַ עָם — without vision, Proverbs warns, a people unravels from within. With it, apparently, a people can turn a beautiful little valley into a sacred home, our sacred home, a place of love and learning, singing, study and social justice with hundreds of kids running down its halls.

So today, I invite you, I implore you, to engage your mind's eye, to imagine, visualize a better tomorrow - for yourself and for our community. Find a new focal point and let it move you, let it widen your pupils, let it change you, let it change us.

Close your eyes, if that helps. Then open them. Let's go forward together.

Amen

ⁱ Paraphrase from Rabbi Pinni Dunner in his essay on “The Mind's Eye.”

ⁱⁱ Proverbs 29:18

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