Science and Religion
On The Value Of The Fuzzy, Blurring, Profoundly Dissolving Lens

This year especially, the air of Yom Kippur is heavy with destiny. What hangs in the balance when we transcend our personal perspective and look back at this world like angels on this day, a month ahead of fateful national elections, is not only our own personal fate, but that of our country and of humanity. Regardless of the results of the election in a month's time—the results of which will be announced when the moon looks just in between the way it looked on Rosh Hashanah and the way it looks now—it is clear that our national community is hurting. This campaign season has revealed depths of missing the mark and missing the boat, beyond what we had collectively appreciated before. It has revealed, by gut-wrenching coincidence, chasms between white and black/Hispanic/Muslim/ Sikh/Jewish America, between politically liberal and conservative-leaning Jews, between men and women. Not only chasms of understanding and relationship—but explicitly and implicitly violent lenses that distort our views of one another… that lead to detrimental policies, unequal treatment under the law, the loss of lives and human potential, harassment, discrimination, and suffering.

So regardless of how the election goes—or of the responses to the election—we will have healing to do as a country. Because some of us will lose very publicly, and the temperatures and rhetoric and finger-pointing and triggering and stakes for well-being are higher than they have been in a while. Identity politics imply that more is tied up in the results of this election; self-worth, sense of safety, survival feel at stake. And there have already been official calls *heeded* to act violently against the "other side," and suggestions that if one side loses there will be violence… and that if the same side wins, there will be violence. We are understandably on edge, no matter which side we are on.

When we gather in shul on Yom Kippur, there are no hashtags on our souls, no identifiers—no claims of any party on us. We are not red or blue; we are the color of light, we are all white—not in the sense of that color-lessness on the U.S. census, not in the sense of linens that shroud the KKK, but the bright white light of a supernova. After all, in the Garden of Eden, when we ate from the tree and were embarrassed by our nakedness, the Torah says that God made us garments of skin… which the kabbalah understands to be *our skin*—not Fred and Wilma garb. We—WE—are beings made of heavenly light. Imagine a map of the country that showed that, that reminded us of that. It would be like a chess set by Yoko Ono, where all of the pieces… are clear.

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From this lofty place of humility (that we are light, that we are dust and ashes), we look at the world through the framework of our liturgy. What can we see from this collective, transcendent vantage point that might be helpful in illuminating the way toward healing for our world? What might the forgiveness, compassion, and humility we seek today lend our efforts to repair civic relationships… so that the deeper our experience of Yom Kippur, the better it might be for the world? Can we help bring at-one-ment to our deeply fractured human community? Can our service, like the ancient service of the High Priest, in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, help in the world outside this synagogue? What elements of a healing resolution might our ancient practices hold, if any?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur bracket the period of Awe: Rosh Hashanah and Din hold strict judgment here (right/wrong, clear lines)—and Yom Kippur holds up *hessed*, compassion, on the other end. Rosh Hashanah gets us clear—fire alarm, shofar blasting clear, sounding the call that problems are afoot within us and among us... it calls on us to call it what it is! It blasts us out of complacency. It's like the way we pick apart each debate and analyze the policy for what it hides, investigate our guts and the social patterns of the voters on the other side, deconstruct the platform and find the faults, name them all, clearly.

Rosh Hashanah shines an ultraviolet light on all of us, under which we all look deeply flawed, because we are, and no amount of makeup will cover that up. So we encounter our flaws honestly. During the year, other people--and media machines--pointing out our flaws to us... but not as clearly or honestly as Rosh Hashanah, which compels us to see our own and applies a divine, unbiased lens.

On Yom Kippur, the view is somewhat more blurred with… compassion. After all, by this point we have been trying our best for at least 10 to 40 days. We are crying as we beat our hearts, astonished to see how many of the litany of failings in the list that we recite actually are our own, weeping in humility as the language of the plural provides just enough support to help us get out our own confession. ("We" fail, abuse, betray is so much easier than "I" fail, abuse,...) Yom Kippur might be compared to the filmmakers' trick, in the days before film was digital and Photoshop®-able: to soften the view for a romantic scene or soften the aging lines on character's face, they would put pantyhose over the camera lens. We still have a view, but we aren't distracted by our hypercritical attention to insignificant details. Our view is softened and so are we... to see a beauty and a common humanity that we might otherwise miss.

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What might the value of this softer Yom Kippur lens be to humanity? What is the value of a blurry view that spirituality encourages, in contrast to the hyperclarity that Science offers?

Even though they are often treated as incompatible, the respective lenses of Science and Religion are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. After all, we know the value of exacting, rule-based scientific lens; we also know its dangers and limitations, its moral blindness, the technology of a Tower of Babel, a Final Solution; its proclamations of truth are temporary. And we know the comforts of the Spirituality; the relief of its reassurance and wisdom; and we also know its dangers and limitations, its demands are imposing and suspect. We need both the exacting and the compassionate lens, both science and religion, even if both are flawed, and perhaps because both are inadequate. For both are necessary to preserve us and the world—especially from each other's absolute power.

Our tradition suggest this. In his first commentary on the Torah, the commentator Rashi asks, Why does the Torah begin w *Genesis*, rather than Sinai? Or Avraham? While it eventually turns to our people, its focus is on the journey to moral realism that began with Avraham, who originated the first version of a unified field theory: that everything comes from one Creator, that there is coherence in the world, is arguably as much a foundation of Science as we know it, as it is of an ethical and spiritual legacy, tradition, religion, as we know it. Rashi's answer is that the Torah is not just a Jewish story, it is a story about the whole of humanity, it is as the Greeks put it—an origin story explaining the beginnings of kinds, *Genesis.*

What, though, is the significance of our spiritual tradition in a rationalist, post-mystical, post-mythical world?

Ishon, the Hebrew word for the pupil of the eye, literally means, "tiny person." This part of the human body reflects in miniature, an optical phenomenon that recalls an existential one; namely, that we reflect one another, and we see and understand ourselves through the eyes of the other; our sense of self *depends* to an extent on how we are seen by others. This name for this body part reminds us that we all know what it's like to feel small in another's eyes. Shame is the natural result of parental redirection ("stop!") meant to help us internalize limits to keep us safe (it works this way in wolf packs, too, when a cub gets out of line. Yet we know the painful experience of being made to feel "less than" and it is a prevalent phenomenon. Cultural lenses refract and reduce us; media tends to turn people and groups into caricatures and like-minded masses—and this past year has seen shame churned out as a veritable commodity.

Surely, some shame is healthy and invaluable to keeping people within lines. But shame is on fire… and any limited reflection of humanity carries a risk of diminishing our view of ourselves or others in ways so severe and deeply hurtful that they can erupt.

What would it be like to actively reflect people in the world—even people with whom we disagree in fundamental ways, with big eyes? With a loving gaze?

I read an article that provides an example of the Yom Kippur lens applied in the world outside, offered in contrast to the psychological analyses delegitimizing one of the presidential candidates—with the same psychological analysis, but a compassionate explanation of the deficiencies and the suffering that it indicates and causes, for the person who has it and for others. The condition is narcissistic alexythemia, an inability to understand or describe emotions in the self and therefore unable to understand, relate, or attach meaningfully to others—and the author invited us to see the sad loneliness and understand it a bit, rather than get all excited about the fact that it exists as a label that we can attache and use to ridicule.

After I shared this piece on facebook, the mother of one of my former students, herself a wonderful teacher in our early childhood program, wrote to me about her her 11-year old's understanding of the election. They watched the debate together and Hannah was appalled by what she saw as bullying behavior by one of the candidates. Saydi shared this with me, "*But after we tried to see him through other eyes*, she saw how someone could see his arrogance as confidence, his bullying as conviction to his message, and his constant interruptions as someone who just wants to be heard. None of it good, or right… or reflective of a person you want as a head of state. But by the end of the analysis, she saw a pathetic man who is thrashing about on a world stage and trapped in his own lies and fear. She saw that those who support him in large part have found an outside voice for their inside ones. She felt sorry for him."

We tend think that what disgusts us about other people doesn't bother them. The truth is that people tend to internalize others' disgust. Shame is expressed in ways that hurt others and ourselves. If Rosh Hashanah is about surfacing the undeniable faults and flaws we all have to feel ashamed of, then it is clearly *in order to* wash shame away by Yom Kippur. For shame drives our bad traits in deeper; denial is an enabler, empowering evil. By Yom Kippur, we know that we are not alone in being flawed; we have turned to one another to atone for 40 days. Now we turn to one another, welcoming each other to the freedom to grow out of shame with a look in our eyes that says, "I know, me too; I hope I've atoned, and let's move forward *together*."

Science and Religion
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During my rabbinical studies, when I was studying in Israel, Lisa and Mitch (names concealed for the protection of privacy) were one of the few married couples. Lisa is a redhead, and she told us that for the first few months after they married, she made sure to wake up before Mitch did, so that she could put on blush… so that he wouldn't know how pale she is! Upon hearing her story, I made a mental note about the relative benefit of marrying someone who wears glasses. Of course, I found someone who doesn't, who sees my flaws just as clearly in the morning—and I learned that *love softens the gaze*, makes the visually obvious less important than matters of the heart. That's how we come before God on Yom Kippur.

God sees everything clearly. Knows our *klayot,* our insides. Before God, the *nistarot*, the hidden things, the sources of our shame, the-what-we-get-away-with, are all exposed. God knows how pale we are and sees all our blemishes. And all of the *nishkachot*, even the things we've managed to forget ourselves, God remembers. If Science means knowledge (which it does), then according to our tradition, God has all of it. But God can see us in our deep human vulnerability and love… and that blurs the edge, softens the lines, helps God form a container of acceptance that we are meant to feel with the deepest of gratitude and carry into the world, with a "pay it forward" mentality. The supplement to knowledge is *caring*. How can we not forgive each other, when we are approaching God for forgiveness on Yom Kippur. And then. how can we not see each other in this forgiving, after we have experienced that on Yom Kippur?

On Rosh Hashanah, we come before the Ruler of the Universe, to be judged. But we also come judging… The resonant energy of Rosh Hashanah awakens the internal judge, as we sort out ourselves (literally, *l'hitpallel,* to pray in Hebrew means to engage in evaluation, judgment)—our choices, tendencies, questions… and the activity can awaken our grievances against God. It is the scientific lens, if you will, within the religious tradition. And we turn that lens on ourselves *all the time*. We who are most critical of others have often experienced the worst criticism and turned that into a tool we use against ourselves a lens sharpened like a knife. On Rosh Hashanah, we thank God for sparing us the knife, for sparing Isaac. We point out that Avraham was ready to use it, and we as his descendants know that readiness ourselves… It's hard not to apply that surgically precise scalpel to our faults. It's so tempting to imagine excising the culprits in our bodies and our body politic who manifest the problems.

By Yom Kippur, however, as we come together in a dissolving vision of light before our Creator, we know that a scalpel is not the way to solve everything… we need a more holistic appreciation for the interconnectedness and inherent struggle in human existence and co-

existence. We are ready to let it sink in that God didn't want Isaac to be sacrificed. We are ready to move with God from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy, to soften our gaze and our hold—on life and on harsh lenses, to go blurry… to see our bride, our political enemy, through the lens of love and understanding, to hear the pain and to address it as a couple, as a community with divergent needs and feelings from the same deep well of human experience.

We know by now, from these 40 days and this fast, that all of us carry brokenness within us, the way our people carried the broken tablets in the ark, through the Wilderness. There are invisible hurts, beyond the telling. Hurts of past relationships, developmental journeys, words that wounded, and self-doubt… there are health anxieties and social anxieties, and sometimes we are so fragile, that we hang by a gossamer thread that no one sees. On Yom Kippur, the gossamer threads shine in the luminousness of the bright light. We are mindful of that web that connects all of us, and we will, God-willing, emerge to tread more softly, honoring one another in our shared human vulnerability.

As we go through the *vidui* (confessional) and the tender phases of remembering and taking stock that comprise our services on Yom Kippur, we are reassured as we stand naked before God in good human company that we are all in this boat together. Hold that consciousness when we leave the sanctuary tonight… hold it for the next 25 days, and hold it beyond until, God willing, we reunite next Yom Kippur to renew it.

Rosh Hashanah reminds us that the Torah accounts for nature and natural law. It gives us guidance for wrestling with our own nature and draws clear lines where morality will impose on our nature: *Me.Le.Kh.* Mind over emotions and appetite. The Torah reads *hessed* as enabling and intervening in nature, or miracles—what scientists might call "astonishingly fortuitous coincidences" like a solar-eclipse and locust plague that work out well for the slaves or water spreading to the side as we step into the marshland while the chariots sink in it—or our existence, period. And our tradition prescribes both—genuine self-reflection and honest, thorough witnessing of self, others, and the natural world, on the one hand, and caring for all of the above, to keep life flowing through it.

May we be blessed by the balancing wisdom of this tradition, by the unyielding and the unlimited light, and may we bring this blessing to the world around us, for healing. May it be sealed, with us, in the Book of Life.

G'mar hatimah tovah.