

Completing the Circle: Accounting for Ourselves, Accounting for the Other
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Tonight begins Rosh Hashanah, a holiday of circles, a holiday of balance-
The head of the year celebrated with a sweet, round challah.

We celebrate the birthday of our world -
A round planet spinning daily, balancing on its axis
Dancing a circle around the spherical sun

We celebrate *Rosh Chodesh Tishrei*,
Tonight, the first moon of the year is new and dark but it promises to soon grow bright
and round. It will come and go, balancing darkness and light, month after month until we
return to another new year.

The circle is the shape of return - the line that goes forward, inevitably makes its way
back home.

Rosh Hashanah kicks off our season of *teshuva* - We have invariably missed the mark
this past year, but we always have the opportunity to return again to what is core,
balancing our misdeeds with good intentions for the new year.

The circle is a shape that represents life -
We come here together with our round lives
We spiral through the seasons, from childhood to adulthood
The rounded belly of the pregnant woman -
The inquisitive, round eyes of the infant -
Life constantly cycles and circles, from dust to dust

The circle is a shape that contains life -
We draw a circle around our selves to define our identity
We draw a circle around our families and we fill the circle with love, protection,
expectation.
We nurture circles of friends, neighbors, colleagues, community members
We draw wider and wider circles, concentric circles, venn diagrams of relationship

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in his Book of Hours :
I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world;
I may not complete this last one but I give myself to it.

On Rosh Hashanah we step into a new circle of life and we give ourselves over to
whatever balance the future has in store.

Maybe this prospect is full of hope -

Some of us have our health, some of us have stable jobs, potentially even with opportunities for growth. Some of us are in school, having just recently started a new year. Some of us have growing families—marriages and births, opportunities for love and joy. Some of us have comfortable living environments, and some of us have exciting travel plans. Some of us may feel lucky and blessed in this new year.

Maybe this new year is terrifying -

Some of us are sick, struggling financially, unhappy professionally, suffering emotionally, experiencing a difficult transition. Some of us haven't been able to get pregnant, some of us have experienced significant loss. Some of us are lonely, some of us are afraid.

Many of us live in both column A and column B - We are blessed and we are lonely, we are excited and we are frightened.

Our tradition recognizes the uncertainty of this moment - Tomorrow during the *Unataneh Tokef* prayer we will ask - "Who will live and who will die? Who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer?" How will the balance of our lives work out in this new year?

Again and again, the traditional liturgy will point us back to a single answer - If we repent, God will accept us. If we pray, God will remember us.

This message is echoed in the traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

וַיִּהְיֶה פָקֵד אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר

God took account of Sarah just as God had said, God dealt with Sarah just as God had spoken

וַתֵּהָרַם וַתֵּלֵד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזָקְנָיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים

Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the set-time of which God had spoken to him.

The barren Sarah, the elderly would be matriarch, is finally remembered. She will finally have her child. The story three times emphasizes that God does what God says

כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר - Just as God said

כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר - Just as God had spoken

אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים - Just as God had told Abraham

This is a God that fulfills promises.

The key word here is "*Pakad*" - God accounts for Sarah, God remembers Sarah.

This word *pakad* is a loan word from the ancient Canaanites. It meant to provide for, to attend to someone's needs. In the Hebrew, the word takes on new meaning - to visit, to appoint and later in the Torah, *pekudai* - to count people or take a census.²

¹ Genesis 21:1-2

² e.g. Numbers 2:32

God serves as the ultimate caretaker and people counter - God sees human suffering and attends to us. God takes account of us and balances our suffering with blessings.

This root *pakad* shows up in other miracle moments -

Before God frees the Israelites from slavery God says:

פָּקַד פְּקַדְתִּי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־הָעֲשׂוּי לָכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם:

I have taken account of you and what is being done to you in Egypt

וְאָמַר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי ... אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב

and as I have said: I will bring you up from the affliction of Egypt,
to the land of the Canaanite ... to a land flowing with milk and honey.³

The God of miracles takes account of human suffering and acts in real time. *pakod p'kad'ti* - In a moment of great uncertainty, God redeems.

In the midrash,⁴ the rabbis imagine that Sarah and Abraham conceived Isaac on Rosh Hashanah. On that new years day like every new years day, God sat in judgment and decided the fate of individuals. On that day Sarah was accounted for.

For some of us this theology might be comforting - God is a God of miracles and love. God knows us, knows our pain and listens to our prayers. Because of God's attention - The barren will ultimately have children, the captive will ultimately become free. God will balance all of our pain with blessings.

But, for many of us, this theology might feel overly optimistic. It might even feel untrue, isolating or difficult - We live in a world where God's actions are not easy to discern. And even if we do believe that God acts in our world, Divine justice is baffling - too often the good and faithful endure pain and suffering, while the immoral enjoy good health and fortune.

We do not live in a world where God so obviously "*pakads*," It is hard to witness how God visits and accounts for the righteous.

I think we have the right verb in use, but the wrong subject.

We each need to be accounted for this new year, but I am not sure we should leave this task solely up to God.

There are two other ways of being accounted for that I want to bring to you tonight.

The first is a process called "*cheshbon ha-nefesh*," which literally means, "accounting of the soul." *Cheshbon ha nefesh* is where we pause in the middle of our busy lives to

³ Exodus 3:16b-17

⁴ Midrash Tanhuma 4:34

reflect. Where are we in life? How have our actions reflected our innermost souls? Have we lived up to our values? This is a new years task - We take account for everything that has occurred in the past year, and we visualize what we need for a balanced new year. How can we complete the circle? How can we keep the good going, and how can we find comfort to balance the bad? In taking stock of our souls in this manner, we account for ourselves without waiting for God.

The second way of being accounted for involves community.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite Jewish stories —

Back in the very old country there once was a child who obediently attended shul every Shabbat with his father. He prayed the right prayers, he bowed and stood and swayed and sang in all the right moments. But still, he had the sense that he was missing something.

One day, the child turned to his father and asked - "Papa, why do we bother praying? We come to synagogue every Shabbat, I do as I'm told - I say all the right words, but nothing happens! What am I doing wrong? Why do we come here?"

After patiently listening to him, the father sat him down and said, "Ah, my child, that is a very good question. Why do people come to synagogue? Well, people come here for many different reasons. Take Shmuly, for instance. Shmuley comes to services to talk to God. Me, I come to services to talk to Smuley."

Some of us here are like Shmueli, some of us want Shmueli to talk to us.

We each need to be accounted for, we need to be remembered, we need to know that we count and we are seen -

But this does not necessarily have to be by God, and it does not have to be solitary - We can also account for one another. We **need** to account for one another.

Last year I had the privilege of helping to facilitate the TI Tent Talks initiative, a campaign that brought over 380 congregants together in small group conversations. We were one congregation having one conversation. The questions were simple - We talked about where we are in our lives and how the synagogue serves our needs or misses the mark.

I was blown away by the power and intimacy of the conversations.

We heard from:

A parent who sees herself as part of a panini press generation - she feels pressured by the needs of her children and her aging parents.

We heard from a longtime congregant who spoke of his desire to find a more meaningful spiritual experience during prayer

We heard from people who felt incredibly supported by clergy during trying times, and we heard from others who had not found relationship with the clergy team

Some people are enjoying retirement and grateful for their engagement at the synagogue, and others are struggling to make ends meet and to find purpose in the empty nest.

Overall, it was remarkable how so many different people had similar experiences. Over the 62 group conversations we heard that:

- In this congregation, we struggle to manage difficult transitions
- We seek spiritual nourishment and greater meaning
- We are jugglers, trying to keep up with life's many commitments
- We want strong relationships with the clergy
- We want to feel and know that we belong

And overall, I heard again and again -

This conversation is fantastic - How do we keep it going?

Last year we started this communal conversation, this accounting for ourselves - but 380 people is only a drop in the bucket for Temple Israel. As we step into this new year, we have the opportunity to continue the conversation and include more voices. And we have the opportunity to listen deeply to what we learned and continue to find ways to make this a home for meaningful relationships.

The first step is showing up in any way that feels important and interesting. There are many circles of community at Temple Israel.

- join us for Shabbat
- engage in social justice with Ohel Tzedek
- Learn with us in Torah study on Shabbat mornings
- participate with TI Cares, our caring community
- If you are in your 20s or 30s join us for Riverway programming, if you are an empty nester join us for 477 events; If you are an older adult come for TILLI our life long learners initiative
- If you are a religious school parent join the events on Sunday mornings or participate in family celebrations
- If you have younger children join us for FYC, our families with young children programming

And if none of this works for you and your family, help create something that does. The blessing of a large place is that you are very likely not alone - there are others who want to join you.

But showing up will only bring us halfway. The desire for connection and a stronger, more intimate community is deeply counter cultural in our over scheduled world. It takes more than interaction to build trust and intimacy. It takes more than being recognized to be truly known.

I think perhaps it takes some honesty. We cannot balance our accounts unless we are honest about what's going on inside them.

When someone asks us how we are doing - the instinct is always to say "I am fine."
What would it look like to truly respond to one another? How would it feel to say:

"I am stressed."

"I am lonely"

"I am excited"

"I am proud"

"I am worried"

"I am uncertain"

"I am happy"

"I am sad"

How would it feel to share a bit of your story with that person in your committee meeting, with the person standing next to you at kiddush, with the other parent at religious school drop off? How would it feel to know more about the lives, loves and struggles of the person sitting next to you right now?

When we ask how someone is doing, how would it feel to take a moment and look in their eyes to say, "no really, how ARE you?"—and truly listen to the response?

The Talmud tells us that "*Kol Israel aravim zeh b'zeh*" - All of Israel is responsible for one other. We can only be responsible for one another if we know each other.

God accounted for Sarah, God remembered Sarah for blessing and we will pray that we too be remembered this year.

But on this Rosh Hashannah, we also see that just as we can be blessed, we too have the power to bless. We can account for ourselves, and we can also become holy agents, who account for each other. We can remember our neighbor, our family member, our friend. We can accompany the other person in their joy and in their sorrow, in their excitement and in their pain. We can help each other find balance, we can help each other find blessing.

On this holiday as we celebrate the circles of life and spirals of experience, may we commit ourselves to finding authenticity within and to living more honestly in our relationships.

May we in this coming year draw wider, more inclusive circles of community.

May we accompany each other with strength and honesty on this next loop of life, this next circle around the sun.

Shana Tova