

FACEBOOK YOM KIPPUR 5770

It's Yom Kippur, and I have a confession to make. I might be, just a little bit...obsessed by Facebook! I know that this is a possibility because recently I was on our computer at home and my son Gabe came up to me and said, "Dad, you're obsessed!"

Facebook allows anyone who signs up to set up their own electronic page, on which they provide photographs and information about themselves. People who know you can find your page, and you theirs, and then with mutual consent, you become Facebook 'friends' with them. A virtual community of one's 'friends' is built, with whom they can share 'posts' kind of like broadcasts- their thoughts, activities, passions, causes, expressions, opinions, pictures, adventures, anecdotes, things they've seen or read, upcoming events. Every post is accompanied by a profile picture, usually a close-up of the face of the broadcaster. These posts from your friends become a never-ending newsreel, and all that you broadcast shows up on the newsreels of all your friends; an embracing audience if there ever was one who are able to provide validating feedback on what you've expressed. You can also send a message directly to one of your friends by clicking on their profile picture, and your picture shows up on their page with whatever you have to say to them.

Once, an acquaintance from high school that I haven't seen for nearly three decades asked to be my Facebook friend, and I agreed. She then must have perused my page because a moment later her face appeared on my page with the following message—"Dude, you're a rabbi!"

Facebook, basically unknown to me until this past June, has allowed me to be more in touch with more people than I have been in years. Now, I regularly see the faces and know about the lives of friends who I rarely call, e-mail or visit. They are caught up with me too, with a depth of familiarity that I could never have before imagined. We are interacting again. We have dialogues about our kids, old photographs and new experiences. In addition, my various contacts, all over the world and from all walks of life, many who have never met the others, now regularly interface with each other. I truly believe that the secret of this technology, the sudden ease that I feel around maintaining connections, is that profile picture, the ubiquitous face that follows each person wherever they go on the site.

This isn't the first time I have been fascinated with a 'face book.' Long before the advent of social networking websites, I was in seminary and taking a class in Modern Jewish Thought- basically studying how various religious philosophers re-define the concept of God for modern Jews. In the midst of in-depth studies of Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Mordechai Kaplan, there was a brief mention of a French-Jewish philosopher named Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas was an ethicist who taught that what the tradition calls God is actually 'face to face' encounter. I was more than intrigued. Now, on the 10th anniversary of my discovery of the 'punim rebbe,' an internet phenomenon has inspired me to turn to him once again.

In one of those lovely confluences that sometimes happen in our lives, that class 10 years ago this fall took place as the Torah portions were telling the saga of Jacob and his twin brother Esau. As I studied that week, I was startled to discover in those narratives an extraordinary repetition of the word 'face.' Honestly, way back then, I started to call the story of the twins, 'sefer ha-panim, or...the book of faces.' Sometimes Jacob ignored face, as when he pretended

to be Esau, or when he didn't recognize that his bride was not his intended but her sister. But, whenever Jacob is in front—the Hebrew word for 'before' and 'face' are the same, good things happen to him. He wrestles with the mysterious stranger, and called it a 'face-to-face' encounter at a place he called 'the face of God', and when he finally saw his brother Esau after many years he said: "raiti panecha kirot penai Elohim. Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God!" This was the moment of truce, of reconciliation, of peace between the warring twins. What did Jacob see to create such a paradigm shift?

Emmanuel Levinas would say that Jacob's revelation was that he finally recognized that even the face of his twin was radically different from his own. Levinas contends that we are all inclined to perceive the world and everything in it as ours, as extensions of ourselves. We even are able to reduce other people in this way. Because we're busy, lazy, and/or reliant on stereotype, we can be with people all the time and never truly see them. But, when we patiently and deliberately take our time and recognize, through sight for most, and touch for the visually impaired, the radical otherness in the faces of the people we meet, we make a stunning discovery—each person is unique, distinct, and most definitely not part of us.

The Hebrew word for face, *panim* (as in the Yiddish 'such a punim'), is a plural word reflective of the fact that no face is alike and that even our own face constantly changes, as it is really a collection of movable features. Our faces are receptive; through the face, we meet the world.

This revelation of the utter autonomy of each face, allows us to understand that we can never know the totality of any other person in the ways we can know ourselves. Therefore, it is always possible and perhaps probable that the others we face may need something from us. Levinas wrote that at this point, 'we become called out of our narcissistic selves, our freedom and control, by the revelation of the faces of others towards a feeling of radical responsibility for them.' Descartes' bottom line, 'I think, therefore I am' is pre-mature, before this face to face epiphany. Afterwards, our existential stance should become, 'I serve others, therefore I am.'

The ancient ancestors had faith in a commanding God. Our ever expanding base of knowledge has broken down that traditional notion, but as long as we, with consciousness face others, we will always be compelled to act towards them with kindness, love, understanding, and generosity. Esau the strong swelled with forgiveness and cried loving tears on the neck of Jacob the weak after they stood face-to-face. This is why Levinas identifies the face encounter as GOD. "The other person looks at me from a dimension of height," he wrote. "Whether accepted or refused, knowing or unknowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete, his face orders me to serve him." Once truly recognized, the faces of others stare back at us with an ethical resistance we generally succumb to.

The next step in this moral development is to begin to see a third face in our encounters. It represents those others who are not 'in my face' at this very moment as well as those I will never meet. These other people obligate us as well, for now in our mind's eye we can see their faces. Thus, through the face we experience what is written in Torah—love strangers as well as neighbors. When people volunteered in our partnership with the CHIPS free health clinic, met the patients and their struggles, they also become advocates for affordable health care for all. When we volunteer down the street at Trinity's soup kitchen, greet and serve meals to real people who are hungry, lonely and homeless, we also hear the call to work for the whole society to become more economically just.

The face-to-face cannot for most of us, a one time discovery. Even after we recognize this truth in the faces of others, we can and do revert to our interior world and again let the faces in our life go by in a blur without pausing to recognize them. When this occurs, our ethical behavior inevitably suffers. Deliberate turning to and recognition of faces must be a consistent spiritual practice, something we work at. It's worth the effort. Despite the extreme responsibility it connotes, ultimately, it is serving others that bring meaning and transcendence to life. I have found grace in nature and in music, and I do find grace in the other's face. Levinas called it living 'beyond being,' a religious reward for a humanity without myths.

When we called our committees 'circles,' when we round the chairs in the sanctuary so we can look at one another while we pray, we are making room for face-to-face moments and enabling, we hope, our ethical and spiritual growth. So, within the Book of Life, we all have our own sefer panim, a Facebook that contains anecdotes that reinforce this notion that the dimension of the divine opens forth with the human face, experiences that remind us in this season of turning how much the turn to recognize the faces of others makes a difference in the world.

Mine includes holy face-to-face moments with people in the hospital, with brides and grooms, and family members at funerals of loved ones or at shiva, or just when reaching out to someone and giving them a private blessing. These moments never leave me feeling drained, only invigorated. It also includes long-ago memories of riding the subway while living in New York and watching as the hard-edged expressions of the people across from me one by one turned to warm smiles as Zoey up in the baby backpack stared at their faces. It includes the words of Craig Kielberger, who at 12 years of age traveled to Asia and returned an activist against child slavery. When asked why he put so much time and energy into the work he replied with words I repeat to my 7th grade class year after year, 'I've looked these children in the eyes.' It includes the remarkable and true story in one of the books I'm currently reading, *What Else But Home*. A 7 year old boy invites a group of kids to his parents' downtown penthouse apartment after a baseball game. The parents, face-to-face with this group of older kids who live with troubled families in public housing, decide on the spot that they were all going to lift each other up, and the group becomes a wildly improbable family unit crossing the chasms of race and class. It includes the time I took a group of teenagers into North St. Louis to deliver meals on wheels and one elderly, home bound woman saw their attentive faces and exclaimed, 'it's like I'm looking at a beautiful bouquet of flowers!'

It also includes my transcendent experience at the inauguration of Barack Obama looking into the hopeful and proud faces of thousands and pledging to myself not to let those emotions wither. So, I attended one of the infamous town hall meetings this summer. I went, determined to support the president but also to channel my inner Gandhi. I carried a supportive sign so it was known that not all of the energy was negative, but I also held out my hand in friendship and said God Bless You to every angry opponent who would listen to me. There was one person whose frightening anger I just know I stopped just by making mine a peaceful and loving face. "As a face reflects itself exactly in water is how a heart is to another heart" says the Hebrew Proverb. We proceeded to disagree rationally, see the humanity and patriotism in the other, and actually gave each other a hug, a la Jacob and Esau.

One of the faces that showed up on my computer Facebook page belonged to a young man who, years ago, was a camper of mine. During those years, his brother had passed away in an

accident and we spent many hours together in the aftermath of that tragedy. We have long been out of touch. A few weeks after he 'friended' me, I received a message entitled 'Strugglin' next to his profile picture. As if no time had passed by, he, now a husband and father, was turning to me again for guidance. He ended the message with these words: "I wish you knew the kind of strength that seeing your face gives to me."

I know that almost everything requires balance and moderation. I'm pretty sure I'm not obsessed, Gabriel, but I promise to watch myself against that. But I do believe that the more we face one another, both in person and through the virtual world of quick as lightening electrons that transcend boundaries, the more we will be able to face this new year of 5770 with courage, wisdom, peace, compassion, and love.