

I See You

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5779 – September 9, 2018
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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The late 1970's was a time of great agitation on behalf of Soviet Jews. Tens of thousands were refused permission by the USSR to immigrate to Israel. One of the most famous refuseniks was Anatoly Sharansky. In March 1977, Sharansky was arrested on multiple charges including high treason and spying for the United States. The following year he was imprisoned and sentenced to 13 years of forced labor. Sharansky was placed in solitary confinement and subjected to intense suffering.

During this time, I had graduated college and I was working as the Assistant Program Director at Hillel at USC. For those who don't know, Hillel is the national organization of Jewish college students. That fall, plans were made for a massive rally on behalf of Soviet Jewry to be held in downtown Los Angeles on a Saturday night. Anticipating that a large number of Hillel students would be there, I had an idea. After the rally, why not host a gathering at USC Hillel for students to enjoy refreshments, and hear live music? My idea was met with some resistance. Some Hillel staff doubted that students would go for this idea. After all, it was a Saturday night and young adults might be inclined after the rally to go out and party.

But eventually I got the green light and I became the main organizer for a gathering we called Café Sharansky. As it turns out, it was a smashing success. After the rally, a couple hundred students, along with Hillel staff, attended the café.

There was a palpable sense of comradery that evening. When the program ended, I felt very good about the café's success.

Yet what I remember most about that evening actually took place a few days later. I received a handwritten note from Rabbi Richard Levy, who at that time was the Executive Director of all the Hillels in Los Angeles. He was someone I tremendously respected - as I still do – for his wisdom and kindness.

Richard wrote to thank me for organizing Café Sharansky. He praised me for not only having a vision for the event but for effectively overseeing the myriad details that went into running the program. Richard's note was not more than three sentences. But I can tell you that his note made a profound impact on me. It was a relatively simple thing for Richard to do, but without a doubt it uplifted me during a critical time in my life when I was uncertain whether I wanted to work fulltime in the Jewish community. It meant the world to me to receive his acknowledgement and his appreciation.

In essence, what Rabbi Levy did that day went beyond mere social niceties. He was the Executive Director of a sizable organization with at least a dozen Hillels throughout Los Angeles. I was the Assistant Program Director at USC Hillel, one of the youngest and certainly the least tenured staff member in the region. But he saw me. He heard me. He affirmed me.

Every single one of us has a need to be affirmed. No one wishes to be ignored as if we do not matter. Especially in the context of communal life, we wish to feel appreciated for who we are. This pertains especially for all of us connected through our relationships at Temple Beth Torah.

We all desire to be seen and heard. At its simplest sense, we exemplify this when we greet one another on Friday night with Shabbat Shalom. During the High Holy Days we say Shanah Tovah or Gut Yuntiff. It is lovely to offer these words of greeting, followed by a handshake, a hug, or a kiss.

But in addition to these ways of greeting one another, I would like to add this evening that there is another form of greeting we can offer. It is not in Hebrew or in Yiddish but instead in Zulu, an African language. We can choose to greet one another with the words, "Sawu Bona."

The phrase Sawu Bona literally means "I see you." Saying Sawu Bona though goes beyond acknowledging that you visually recognize someone else. It expresses a feeling that is more than just acknowledging another person. Instead, it represents a deeper appreciation of another person. "I see you" means "I see who you really are, your thoughts and feelings, the presence of your soul."

You may remember this phrase, "I see you," from the blockbuster movie Avatar. On the planet Pandora, when the Na'vi people would encounter another, they would say "I see you." In doing so, they expressed a kinship one to another, not only as members of the same people but as sacred souls interconnected through a divine ecosystem.

Sawu Bona. Beginning this night of Rosh Hashanah and throughout the Days of Awe, we yearn for God to see us. This is a season of the soul, a time to rejoice, to reflect, to return. We pray that God sees us and we behold God. In utter humility, on Rosh Hashanah morning we proclaim that our origin is dust and unto dust we shall return. O God, look upon us and favor us.

On this night and culminating on Yom Kippur, we yearn for God to hear us. Sh'ma Koleinu, O God hear our voice. From Psalm 86: O God, all of us need Your compassion. When we are praying, when we are desperate, listen to us, and answer us. When we call You in our trouble, enfold us in Your love.

During these Days of Awe, we long not only for God to hear and see us, but we yearn for others to hear and see us as well. To hear the stirrings of our heart and to see the fullness of our lives. To lift one another with good news about a family simcha, a wedding, an engagement, or an upcoming Bat Mitzvah. We see one another and inquire about a loved one who is ill, hoping to hear he or she is on the road to recovery. For those who are wounded and in pain, struggling with illness or the loss of a job; for those going through a difficult time in a marriage or whose child is struggling in some way, Sawu Bona, may we see and listen with compassion, to reach out to one another and lend our hands to those in need.

"Imagine how our lives might be if everyone had even a bit more of the Wisdom that comes from seeing clearly. Suppose people everywhere . . . stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only so long as to recognize their shared humanity. Surely the heartbreak of the world's pain, visible to all, would convert everyone to kindness."¹

During the High Holy Days, we long for God to see and hear us. We yearn to see and hear one another. Sawu Bona. The two are intertwined. For when we honor the divine spark implanted within each human being, we affirm our faith in God. "God's voice speaks through us. God's hands are our hands. God's work is our work. God is One when we are One."²

The spiritual enterprise at the heart of the High Holy Days is to strengthen our bonds to God as we affirm the worth of everyone in our community. Sawu Bona: we are interconnected, reflections of the Divine, worthy of being heard and seen. When we see and hear one another with attentiveness, we elevate ourselves as a sacred community.

During the High Holy Days, let us strive to be aware of our precious bonds. And beyond these ten days, let our affirmation of Sawu Bona not be confined only to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For in the coming year, we are going to consciously embark on a path of elevating Temple Beth Torah as a kehilla kedosha, a holy congregation. We are going to concentrate on the most fundamental aspects of being a community. We are going to, in a more focused and direct way, see and listen to one another.

How? The answer is deceptively simple yet enormously significant. We are going to meet in small groups in one another's homes. These gatherings will consist of people who may know one another as well as those who have not socialized before. There is something to be said for long time members and newer members coming to know one another.

At these small group meetings, there will be more than just pleasant conversation. At each gathering, there will be a facilitator who will ask leading questions. These questions might include:

When did you become a member of Temple Beth Torah?

What keeps you a member?

What more do you desire from the synagogue?

With open ended questions such as these, there are obviously no right or wrong answers. The purpose is to elicit candid responses, which will be transcribed during the evening.

And what will happen after this gathering? Will it be just a one-time get together, hopefully pleasant but essentially a one off?

The answer is not really. For it is the intention of our Temple's leadership that our listening groups begin a process of transformation for Temple Beth Torah. Now that's a pretty lofty statement. But what it means in the larger picture is that in order for our congregation to thrive, we must do more than offer excellent educational opportunities for children and adults; as well as meaningful worship services for Shabbat and festivals. We must focus our attention on seeing one another and hearing one another more fully.

Our listening sessions may lead to the creation of small groups that get together once a month to learn or to celebrate Shabbat. It may lead to a group coalescing around a social justice issue and working together to effect change. It may lead to people discovering they share a passion for hiking or camping or learning or Israeli dancing. This process of Engagement will unfold over the course of the coming year.

There is no way to predict what will come out of these small group gatherings. But that's the point. The leadership of our congregation is not trying to drive a particular agenda other

than saying that in our congregation, everyone counts, everyone matters, and everyone wants to be seen. Everyone deserves to be heard.

Sawu Bona: in the coming year let us truly see one another. Sawu Bona: let us listen as well.

You may ask, “When we are greeted with the words Sawu Bona, is there a response we can offer in turn?” There is a word in Hebrew that means, ‘I have been seen and heard.’ The word is Hineni. It is a response given when one’s fullness is recognized. “Hineni,” Abraham said when God instructed him to bring his son Isaac to Mount Moriah. Hineni was the response that Moses gave when God said go to Egypt and proclaim “Let my people Go.”

In this New Year, let us see and hear one another with mindfulness and gratitude. Let us take note of the Divine everywhere we look. May we

“Notice the Holy One
In blessing and in beauty,
In acts of repair,
In the unearthing of truth,
In eyes that meet,
In the tumult of change,
In words of forgiveness,
In the bridges we build to those we hurt,
In the flow of the year
In the course of a journey,
In rising and falling,
In the bend of a river,
In the hand we hold out to those who hurt us,
In the life we are living
In blessing and beauty.”³

I say to all of you connected by sacred bonds on this night of Rosh Hashanah,

Sawu Bona.

May we respond, as did Abraham and Moses, with the word, Hineni.

I affirm you as I say: Sawu Bona

Let us join as one in responding: Hineni.

1. Sylvia Boorstein, *Mishkan HaLev*, page 135.
2. *Mishkan HaNefesh, Rosh Hashanah*, page 25.
3. *Mishkan HaLev*, page 119.