

Erev Yom Kippur 5766
Kol Nidre
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"A Picture Speaks..."

Please take out the daf, the page that was handed out to you this evening. You'll see that it has some pictures on it. I'm sure you've already been looking at them. A picture speaks a thousand words, doesn't it?

The picture marked #2 [right], was found in the New York Times, September 30, 2000. The caption reads: "An Israeli policeman and a Palestinian on the Temple Mount." The implications are obvious, right? The Israeli policeman has just beaten that poor Palestinian guy and is about to go after the photographer. Isn't this awful? Yes, if it were true, it would indeed be awful.



The true story behind the picture is something quite different than what we think - there lies the awfulness. Dr. Aaron Grossman, of Chicago, Illinois, the father of the victim, sent the following letter to the Times: "Regarding your picture on page A5 (Sept. 30) of the Israeli soldier and the Palestinian on the Temple Mount - that Palestinian is actually my son, Tuvia Grossman, a Jewish student from Chicago. He, and two of his friends, were pulled from their taxicab while traveling in Jerusalem, by a mob of Palestinian Arabs and were severely beaten and stabbed. That picture could not have been taken on the Temple Mount because there are no gas stations on the Temple Mount and certainly none with Hebrew lettering, like the one clearly seen behind the Israeli soldier attempting to protect my son from the mob." Ironically, after all that happened, Tuvia just made aliyah this summer. A picture speaks a thousand...my friends, not always.

Picture number 1 [right] - what do you see? There is a fence with men on one side and soldiers on the other, but what are they doing? Look closely at their heads. They are wearing kipot.



This picture was taken at K'far Maimon, one of the settlements in Gaza at the time of the disengagement. Now count the people on both sides of the fence. There are numerous settlers but only nine soldiers. The picture you see is of morning prayers,

Shacharit. In order to have a full morning service, we need ten people to form a minyan. The soldiers needed the demonstrators to have a minyan in order to hold a service, not the other way around. The subtext to this; the demonstrators must have been asked by the soldiers to move their minyan far away from the center of the K'far Maimon event, to the barbed wire in order to enable them to pray in a minyan. And the demonstrators obviously agreed. Because their horror at what the soldiers had been commanded to do was not as great as their desire to help another Jew do a mitzvah.^[1] It was so important for these settlers and soldiers to pray together, that each of them cast aside their orders, emotions, and frustration about what they needed to do that day. For a few moments, they were Jews who prayed together, setting aside all other differences.

A picture does not always speak a thousand words.

In fact, that is what we are doing here tonight. How is it that we judge the world in which we live, the people with whom we live and most importantly on Yom Kippur - how is it that we judge ourselves?

Not everything or everyone is always as it appears - first impressions, we are taught, are everything - tonight reminds us to look deeper at our world and at each other.

This is even evident in our study of Torah. We are taught by our rabbis, *Shivim Panim L'Torah*, there are seventy faces to Torah. For those who engage in the study of Torah on a regular basis and over a period of years, it becomes abundantly clear that there is more than one way to read Torah. The interpretations and commentaries are endless and being written by individuals, even from our own congregation. Just check out the TBS Commentaries on-line. The rabbis understood that the Torah is not stagnant, nor should it be. For we turn it over and over again to see it from all sides and all angles. And as we have already seen with headlines and newsflashes, there is always more than one opinion and view to each and every story.

So to question one: How do we even begin to understand the world in which we live?

The print media took greatest advantage of images that defined some of the most impactful moments of our history - war time. Almost every war has one photographic image that emerges and remains ingrained in the public's mind as the defining picture of that war.

From the Holocaust, we are familiar with the boy in the cap and his hands raised over his head. From the Vietnam war, we know the photo of the village child running naked with terror on her face. From the Six Day war, we are inspired by the paratroopers looking up at the Kotel - the Western Wall - following Jerusalem's liberation. And, during the Yom Kippur war, we are moved by the image of Hillel Unsdorfer who was a prisoner of war in Egypt and carried the Torah with him through the Suez Canal as he returned home to Israel. From these and all of the wars in our life times, we have turned to those images to keep us in touch with the world.

Today we turn to more immediate images through television. When was the last time you channel surfed? Today, we have anywhere from 75 to over 300 channels to choose from. It used to be so much simpler with three major networks. Have you ever noticed how quickly you can surf through all those channels and still put down the remote and say, "there's nothing on!"

We are a part of a world that is looking for instant information! We have imac, ipod, itunes, iphoto, even itorah! We have become a civilization demanding instant information, up-close right here, right now, "... and now for the weather..." We reach out to these instant images and sometimes make quick assumptions about the story they must be telling - even if that story seems too ridiculous. Take a recent photo of President Bush at a UN Security Council meeting. Out of two hundred photos taken that day, only one made it to the papers. The one of President Bush writing a note to Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice which read, "I think I may need a bathroom break. Is this possible?" [wait for the laugh]

Of course the late night comedians and internet comics loved this as they delightedly put their own spin on this newsgrabber. But the real story behind the picture came out later from the President's staff who explained that it was not usual for the Heads of State to attend many UN Security Council meetings and the President wanted to make sure he could find the right opportunity to take a break from the meeting. But the truth notwithstanding, the distorted story of this one image took on a life all its own.

Friends, truth be told - to this first question of how we judge the world in which we live, I have no idea except to say that if our lives are as complicated as they are, so to is our world - meaning that whole stories cannot be explained in a thirty second sound bite or in a picture that is out of context.

Here is what I do know though, the answer to our second question - how do we judge those around us, in our lives - how do we view the picture of other human beings? Very simply, we give them the benefit of the doubt. We look deeper at the context of the picture, of the colors of emotions, of the texture of the spirit and most importantly, when we judge a person we must take into consideration how that person has been developed.

Our earliest text teaches us this. Pirkei Avot, the Teachings of our Ancestors, teaches, *Al tistakeil b'kankan eilah b'mah she'yeish bo* "Don't look at the wine flask, but rather at what is in it."[\[2\]](#) The image suggests that what is on the outside is not always indicative as to what is truly on the inside. Looking at the surface of our year and our lives does not tell the full story. The simple caption may only tell a fraction of who we are, yet our essence is lost to the one who sees this picture and examines our life based on only a snapshot.

The President of Harvard made a mistake by prejudging people and it cost him dearly.

A lady in a faded gingham dress and her husband, dressed in a homespun threadbare suit, stepped off the train in Boston, and walked timidly without an appointment into the president's outer office.

The secretary could tell in a moment that such backwoods, country hicks had no business at Harvard and probably didn't even deserve to be in Cambridge. She frowned. "We want to see the president," the man said softly. "He'll be busy all day," the secretary snapped. "We'll wait," the lady replied.

For hours, the secretary ignored them, hoping that the couple would finally become discouraged and go away. They didn't. And the secretary grew frustrated and finally decided to disturb the president, even though it was a chore she always regretted doing. "Maybe if they just see you for a few minutes, they'll leave," she told him. And he signed in exasperation and nodded.

Someone of his importance obviously didn't have the time to spend with them, but he detested gingham dresses and homespun suits cluttering up his outer office. The president, stern-faced with dignity, strutted toward the couple.

The lady told him, "We had a son that attended Harvard for one year. He loved Harvard. He was happy here. But about a year ago, he was accidentally killed. And my husband and I would like to erect a memorial to him, somewhere on campus." The president wasn't touched; he was shocked.

"Madam," he said gruffly, "We can't put up a statue for every person who attended Harvard and died. If we did, this place would look like a cemetery."

"Oh, no," the lady explained quickly, "We don't want to erect a statue. We thought we would like to give a building to Harvard."

The president rolled his eyes. He glanced at the gingham dress and homespun suit, then exclaimed, "A building! Do you have any earthly idea how much a building costs? We have over seven and a half million dollars in the physical plant at Harvard." For a moment the lady was silent. The president was pleased. He could get rid of them now.

And the lady turned to her husband and said quietly, "Is that all it costs to start a University? Why don't we just start our own?" Her husband nodded.

The president's face wilted in confusion and bewilderment.

And Mr. and Mrs. Leland Stanford walked away, traveling to Palo Alto, California, where they established the University that bears their name, a memorial to a son that Harvard no longer cared about.

This is what we call, an urban legend and probably not true, but that's irrelevant, because the message speaks to our hearts.

Let us not look merely at the pictures of people lives, but let us take time to read the stories of their lives - not the Cliff Notes version, but the whole book. It not only gives them the benefit of the doubt, it makes us better people.

That is even more true of ourselves. Let me ask you: What kind of photographs are hanging on your walls or out on display at home? I don't mean artwork by famous photographers. I'm talking about your *personal* pictures. More than likely, they're recent family photos documenting a recent birthday or celebration like a wedding or reunion. Maybe you have some old photos of relatives long gone - the matriarchs and patriarchs of our families, staring at you with straight

faces and constricting clothing as they must have sat for minutes on end waiting for the photographer to freeze them permanently in time. Looking at the photos on your own walls, can you imagine the stories behind each precious photo. How much work it took to coax your son to keep the tie on for just one more minute? Or when you ran through the house to grab the camera because the kids were being so cute in the bathtub. That afternoon when the grandparents were over and they held your daughter on their lap and read her a story. What picture of you do you show to others? How true is the portrait you portray to the reality of who you are?

So too in our lives as we stand here before God and our congregation on this night of Kol Nidrei, a night in which we reflect on all our vows, oaths, achievements and disappointments. Our actions are open to interpretation not only by God, our neighbor, but also ourselves. As we examine our Book of Life from this past year, how we interpret our actions changes from the moment the action initially took place, to how we felt about our action moments later and tonight, as we stand together, examining our year in review. There are numerous faces and images we place on ourselves as we ask, what was I thinking when I acted in such a way, or why didn't I think more clearly when I did not act in a way I wish I would have. And sometimes, we are even our own worst critic. I have to ask, am I willing to give myself the benefit of the doubt?

As we stand before God and with our community, do we not want our full story told? Do we not hope that the story of our lives is told in its entirety and not only through a headline? And do we pray that God will look upon us and see who we are beyond the surface and give us the strength to be better human beings and empower us to make a difference in this world?

We are challenged to look deeper into our lives and the lives of those with whom we share our homes, our community and our world. We should expect to examine and be examined beyond the mere surface of our lives. We should strive to open ourselves to those around us in order that we are better understood and our intentions for continuing the work of creation are made clear for all to achieve.

How do we interpret the world in which we live - the answer: very carefully. How do we judge others - by giving them the benefit of the doubt and not judging before we get to know their full story. How do we portray ourselves - with integrity, with wisdom and with care.

When our great-grandchildren see our picture on their wall, our story should be so well formed and clear that our lives and our work become seamless. Our lives are a text and tonight, as the gates stand open and our books are being written and later sealed, may we ensure that there is more than the brief headline. May our books remain open for all to read and may our lives inspire those around us toward, tshuvah, t'filah and tzedakah - a good path, prayer and acts of righteousness. Let's remember that a picture does not always speak a thousand words - only we do. And may this be our blessing - Amen.

[1] Intermountain Jewish News, August 12, 2005. Lively Opinion: Gaza Pullout by Toby Klein Greenwald. Photographer unknown.

[2] Pirkei Avot 4:20