

Seeing each other's faces:
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In surgery for a heart attack, a middle-aged woman has a vision of God by her bedside. "Will I die?" she asks. God says, "No, you have thirty more years to live."

With three decades to look forward to, she decides to make the best of it. Since she's in the hospital, she gets implants, liposuction, a nose job, hair transplant, and collagen injections in her lips. She looks great! The day she's discharged, she exits the hospital with a swagger, crosses the street. Out of nowhere, an ambulance careens down the road, strikes the woman, killing her. Ascending through the clouds, the woman sees God up in heaven. She exclaims to the almighty one, "You said I had thirty more years to live." God responds, "That's true." "But I don't understand," the woman says, "So what happened?" God answers, "I didn't recognize you."¹

Our face is the most expressive part of our body and the way people recognize us. Even when we struggle to remember a person's name, we almost always can recall some of their facial features. Often, we will say, "I never forget a face." Our eyes and mouths can convey surprise, humor, anger, joy, and a whole range of emotions. We have distinctive chins, lips, eyes, cheekbones, and hair that help others immediately identify us. In less than a second, we can recognize a stranger, acquaintance, or loved one.

By now, almost all of us have used Zoom, Skype, or Face time to connect with loved ones, friends, and coworkers. Some of you were already doing this, while others had to take the plunge into cyber communication. It hasn't always been easy for those of us technologically challenged. It was daunting, but we did it. We extended ourselves because it was the only way to see another human being. We did it because it was the only way to attend a meeting, gathering, or celebration. It has become the essential way to connect and see another person during this pandemic.

And now, there is so much happening on our screens. There are a plethora of studies, meetings, and get-togethers. Oh, it's everything from zooming a happy hour with friends, classes on line, exercise sessions, lectures, reviews, and even performances. Despite all the programs and events on line, there are obvious downfalls as well. Jeff Leboff commented to me only weeks into the pandemic, "Screen time is getting old for me." How about you? Do you feel that all the Zoom and live streaming are getting you down?

It's for a reason. We weren't genetically designed to see a person's face blown up in front of us. As humans, when we see a person, well, in person, we rarely stare at them for any length of time. Also, consciously and unconsciously, we observe many things about them. We immediately notice the emotions crossing a person's face and then we take into account their body language as well. There are subtle cues that we take in from seeing a person in front of us that gives us valuable information as to how they are feeling and how they are reacting. We can glean all this without staring at person directly in the eye. Stanford researcher, Jeremy Bailenson, writes in the Wall Street Journal, "The default settings on most Zoom sessions show a huge face of the person speaking. The brain is particularly attentive to faces, and when we see large ones, we interpret them as being close. Our "fight or flight" reflex responds." ²

It's uncomfortable, sort of like when I pet my cat on his belly, he will attack or run away. It's just instinctive. We read each other's moods by a variety of factors that don't entail a full scrutiny of a person's face. This is why many studies say that people are experiencing some Zoom fatigue and are zoning out during meetings. Julia Sklar in an article in National Geographic writes, "Virtual interactions can be extremely hard on the brain." Regarding the gallery view, she adds, "that this "Brady Bunch-style" screen option challenges the central vision of the brain, "forcing it to decode so many people at once that no one comes through meaningfully, not even the speaker."³

We living in a time where despite people's faces being boldly displayed, we are not really seeing them. I don't know if any of you remember James Cameron's movie, Avatar, about a native people called the Na'vi who are in harmony with nature, animals, and each through their deity, Eywa. Neytiri, daughter of the chieftain, says to human Jake in an avatar body, "I see you." She is not referring to his physical form rather she means, "I see who you are. I see your essence." Do we really see others? Are we really connecting with people at this time?

This isn't a new problem. We've been racing past people for years without seeing them whether they are a checkout worker, waiter, coworker, or even a friend. Most ominously, many lose their humanity when they go online. When we aren't face to face with another, we can be more prone to post inflammatory posts, rude comments, and offend or hurt others on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snap Chat, and more. This can lead to ruptured relationships outside of screen time and it's sad to see years of friendship so easily discarded.

On the other hand, we are certainly blessed to live in a time of technological communication. Can you imagine how things would be if this pandemic happened ten or twenty years ago? We

would be limited to phone calls, TV programming, and just waving at others from the distance. Rather today, we can see our grandchildren, lovers, and friends and not only talk but can show them our homes or our latest projects. There is no doubt that without these technological platforms, we would be much more isolated.

However, even with all the technology at our disposal, many of us still feel quite alone. We are living in a pressure cooker of Covid 19 where we are worried about our health and the wellbeing of our loved ones. Many are financially strained and desperately worried of how they will find or keep their jobs. Children are falling behind in school. And all of our lives have been majorly disrupted. There is loss, isolation, and pain. We need heart felt connections now more than ever. We need each other.

In the Talmud, there is a beautiful teaching about when one can recite the morning Shma and its blessings that includes, “*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, Listen oh Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.” You are supposed to recite it every morning and night but how do you know when it is morning? In tractate Berachot, the rabbis explore how much light is needed in order for it to be considered morning. How would you answer? In the Talmud, the rabbis suggest that perhaps it’s when you can tell the difference between the blue and white threads of a tallit. And then another says, “It is when you can tell the difference between a dog and wolf.” *Aherim*, sages who taught anonymously, decisively state, “When one can see another person, who is merely an acquaintance, from a distance of four cubits and recognize him.”

A cubit, is an ancient measure of length used in the Torah. It is the length from one’s elbow to the tip of their middle finger, approximately 18 inches. So four cubits are approximately 6 feet. Hmmm, six feet sounds familiar. The amount of social distance we are supposed to have from another person to minimize our risk of contracting or transmitting Covid 19. In other words, if we can recognize the face of someone who is socially distant, then there is enough light to recite the Shma. Quite powerful don’t you think? This is why Rav Huna said: The *halakha* is in accordance with *Aherim*.²⁴ When is it morning? It is when we can recognize the face of another person at a social distance.

How do we see the humanity in one who is six feet apart or even thousands of miles away but are on our screen? We have to stop ourselves for a bit. We have to slow down for a moment and get outside of our head, our worries. We need to see the other person as someone who is also struggling, lonely, and striving to do the best that he or she can. We have to take time to listen, to hear them, to really see them.

When the Biblical Jacob is going to encounter his estranged brother Esau after twenty years, he is scared. It is for good reason. As a youth, he got his brother to trade his birthright for a bowl of red lentil stew and then he dressed up as him to trick his father in gaining the ultimate blessing. Last time Jacob saw Esau, he was fleeing from his wrath. Fast forward two decades, hours before confronting his estranged brother and his past, Jacob wrestles with a divine being at the Yabbok River. When dawn is breaking, he finally prevails and comes out of it limping but with a new name, Yisrael, the one who strives with God and prevails. Upon seeing Esau, Jacob bows down before him several times. Despite everything, Esau hugs him in an embrace of forgiveness. It is then that Jacob in relief says,

רְאִיתִי פְנֵיךָ כְּרֵאֵת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים וַתִּרְצָנִי:

“To see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably.”⁵

Seeing Esau’s face in this moment of connection, for Jacob, is like seeing God. Esau lets go of his anger and was able to embrace his brother in the ultimate moment of forgiveness and love. In Judaism, we say that we are all created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Maybe this is why it feels so powerful when we traverse the chasm separating us as individuals to reach another person. When we understand and care, it is then that we know that neither of us is alone. When we see or experience something together, and we are elevated.

Martin Buber speaks of these kinds of connections in his seminal work, “I and Thou.” The first relationship is between an I and an It. This is characterized by us perceiving, sensing, and thinking about someone or something. This is necessary to live, work, and learn. It is essential for the functioning of our society or just to get anything done. But life isn’t all, “I to It” relating. There’s another kinds of relationship that Buber calls and “I and Thou.” This kind of bond can’t be measured, contextualized, or verbalized. It defines logic but it can give one a glimpse of eternity. It’s the kind of interaction with another person that makes us feel connected, close, understood and creates a link that transcends the moment. Have you ever had a deep conversation with a person or just spent time with another, where you both left with an indelible sense that you have shared something special? Have you had a moment with someone that changed you?

For Martin Buber, I and Thou relations are also possible with the ultimate Thou, i.e., God. Buber writes, “In the relation with God unconditional exclusiveness and unconditional inclusiveness are one. He who enters on the absolute relation is concerned with nothing isolated

any more, neither things nor beings, neither earth nor heaven; but everything is gathered up in the relation. For to step into pure relation is not to disregard everything but to see everything in the Thou, not to renounce the world but to establish it on its true basis...He who goes out with his whole being to meet his Thou and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds Him who cannot be sought.”⁶

I don't know what kind of relationship you have with God. It really depends on your conception with deity. For those who believe in some kind of higher being or power, it behooves one to reach out and connect. If you are in this category, there is strength and hope to be found like one who is thirsty reaches a cool pool of water and takes a drink. For those without this conception, there is still the opportunity to connect with life which is bigger than any of us. For each of us to know that we are not alone but part of a vastness of life and energy starting with the beating of our hearts, the firing of the neurons in our brains that cascades outward. It is in the breeze of the wind, the warmth of the sun, and the ripples on the water. It floats up to the clouds, the darkness of space, the distant planets and galaxies. We are part of something so much bigger than ourselves and we can relate to it by opening our minds and hearts to an I and Thou relation. Even in fleeting moments, we can feel the vitality of life and know we are part of the fabric of existence. We just have to be willing to truly see it, I mean, sense it.

It is there in our world and it is present between you and me. By striving to see the common humanity in everyone, we can forge a powerful connection. If we remind ourselves that each of us have our pain, hurt, struggles, love, and joy. We all have feelings and experiences that make us who we are. On the other side of that screen are people trying to do their best to survive, work, learn, and care for those they love.

When we are aware of others, there is finally enough light for us to see the true face of our friends, family, and acquaintances. We know that we have the power to reach over the chasm to connect, to calm, to love, and to heal.

Maybe we be able to see the face of one another, to see each other as fellow journeyers fighting the storms of this virus, charting the seas of our lives. And may we know that we are not alone.

Notes:

¹ <https://www.readersdigest.ca/culture/70-funniest-jokes-readers-digest/>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-zoom-meetings-can-exhaust-us-11585953336>

3 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-bad-looks-good/202004/are-zoom-meetings-tiring-you-out-heres-how-recover>

4 Talmud Berachot 9b

5 Gen. 33:10

6 I and Thou by Martin Buber pg. 79