

Yom Kippur – 5778
Objects in the Mirror

by Rabbi Howard Lifshitz

“Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.” That is the message printed on the passenger-side mirror of our cars. It is there because the mirror is curved outward to provide the driver a wider field of view and to reduce dangerous blind spots. However this curve causes an aberration which that message is alerting us to. Though now more can be seen, what is seen is not accurate. What we see, is **not** what we get, for while the cars may look distant, they are actually much closer. So just looking isn’t enough. In addition to seeing, we have to process the image and evaluate how near the other vehicles actually are. To avoid an angry blast of a horn or, worse, a collision, our mind has to consider the distorted image and then make mental adjustments to accurately judge the closeness and drive wisely

And just as we need to do that with cars and driving, so is it necessary to ask “are others closer to us than they appear to be?” If we re-evaluate our perceptions, our preconceived ideas, and our stubbornly held positions, we might eliminate some of the blind spots that threaten to distance us from each other and instead perceive how close we really are.

The word *close* has multiple meaning. It refers to the physical. How near are two people or things — as physical distance diminishes, closeness increases. It can describe emotional connection — I can feel close to Israel even though it is far away, close to a relative or friend who is not seen very often. And it can refer to how alike — how similar one thing is to another — a reproduction may be close to the original; this new melody is close to an old one; two people may be close in the way they share the same values or interests or behavior. On this High Holy Day, let us consider the idea of closeness in all its dimensions and answer these questions: Are people closer than they appear? Do we let distance, either physical or emotional, get in the way of true closeness? And do we allow differences in appearance or life style create blind spots that get in the way of relating to one another?

By the way, I recently learned something about how close, how similar, all human beings are in spite of our nearly infinite variety. According to genetic research, the DNA of all human beings is 99.5% the same. This is the equivalent of having 275,000 sheets of printed material (about 550 reams), all of which are exactly the same except for 500 pages. No matter how we look, no matter what different traits we possess, we are much closer than we appear to be. Sitting next to any human being in the world, the two of us are indeed close, mostly the same, despite

our varied appearances..

In its own language the Talmud (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5), understood this. There it is taught, “One first man, Adam, was created alone, to show the greatness of the Holy One for when a man strikes many coins from the same mold, they all resemble one another, but the King of Kings, makes *all human beings* from the same mold, Adam’s mold, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow.” Thus, in the very diversity of human kind we should recognize, our essential similarity, our closeness, as descendants of Adam haRishon, the first earthling, and doing this we might also perceive the greatness of God, the metaphorical father of us all.

There are many who are far away from us, who seem strangely different, whose beliefs make them seem far removed. There are those whose actions seem strange, whose life styles seem bizarre; whose economic level is so different from our own, that we do not truly relate to them. We label them; we categorize them; we build walls to separate us from them, to keep them out of our guarded buildings and gated communities. That way we can think of them as far removed — not our concern, not our responsibility. However our sense of ethics, the values our sages have taught us, must lead us to alter such perceptions so that we see — and more importantly, feel — that they are, in fact, closer than they appear. Only then will we accept in meaningful ways our obligations to them.

The poor, the hungry, the elderly, the homeless, and the ill are close to us and we should not have a blind spot when it comes to their needs. We cannot be indifferent as budgets for schools, social agencies and health care are slashed. It is our duty to reach out to the immigrants who come here, just as most of our own families did not so long ago. Not only should we welcome them, we should actively ease their way into our communities. As distant as we may like to think certain communities are — such as those who have no hope, those who find drugs to be the only way out of horrendous situations, those who live in fear of being stopped by the police — they *are* closer to us than they may appear to be and we have a moral obligation to empathize with them, and make them our concern. That means reconsidering our social policies. It inevitably will mean that we, the more fortunate in the world, will pay higher taxes, will have to be more charitable than we have been, and will be challenged individually to take up more volunteer work.

But these days, instead of drawing closer, we are growing more distant from each other. Because we listen only to the stations and read only the publication that match our preconceived ideas, we seldom consider other points of view. Economic and class divisions are growing greater and it becomes harder and harder to feel any connection to more and more segments of our society. In this balkanized environment, some religious groups are becoming more intolerant and have little or no respect for others. Not just here, but elsewhere in the world this trend is seen. For example, consider that in Israel the ultra-orthodox and the fundamentalists take more extreme positions, that one group of rabbis now blacklists certain other rabbis, and that one

group of Jews seeks to determine which Jews can pray, and in which way, at the Western Wall.

Nowhere else has this tendency to divide and separate groups of people, to turn some against others, been more insidious than in the political realm in our own country. The language of politics has become harsher and few have had the courage to cross lines or speak truth to power. Congress remains divided, with the most extreme members stymying the efforts of those who might cooperate. At the highest level of our government, coarse speech is common place and statements continue to be made that divide rather than unite the citizenry. The ceaseless the talk of walls, and the restrictions on immigration, separate us into suspicious and mistrusting groups. It remains to be seen whether our President, and his followers, will recognize that those who are different looking or who speak a different language, are more similar than they appear to be, and then begin to speak more wisely. But, on the other hand, if division remains the regnant posture, this will be a dark period in our history.

What are we to do? The one thing we dare not do is remain silent, thinking that such matters are far enough way that they won't bother us. Good instruction was provided by the rabbis when they taught: *shtekah kehoda-ah domya* — silence signals consent. Silence only encourages the hate mongers; it implies that we do not see the danger or, worse, do not care. Therefore we are obligated to respond quickly, forcefully and persistently, using our intelligence and our resources to educate each other and reduce hatred and suspicion. We ought to avail ourselves of all the legal tools available to protect the innocent and minimize the spread of intolerance . That is why every major Jewish organization reacted with clarity and speed to the events in Charlottesville and why it is good that many business leaders have set a good example by affirming their belief in the ideals of our county while distancing themselves from those who confuse even-handedness with speaking with integrity and insight, from those who are unable to distinguish between right and wrong, between good and evil.

Individually, we can take a more active role in the political process, working for the election of candidates who are more moderate and willing to compromise. When there are rallies to support the values that are important to us, we should take our place there. It is also important that we fund those organizations that monitor hate crimes such as the Anti-Defamation League, the Religious Action Center, our own Federation agency — the JCRC, the Jewish Community Relations Council — and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Even in our own daily lives we can act. For example, when we are in a group where someone makes a comment, proffers a generalization or tells a joke that denigrates someone or some group, instead of being silently uncomfortable, it is incumbent upon us to speak out and let others know what we find offensive, for that is how attitudes begin to change, one person at a time. When we find ourselves making fun of others because of their ideas, their behavior or their appearance, we can become more accepting of them as individuals even if we disagree with their choices. That is the way one person draws another closer, and that is the way communities heal.

At this time of year as we turn inward to consider our own flaws, let us also turn outward to be more aware of those around us, to perceive how close they are to us and to comprehend their condition which we too often have failed to see. Recognizing that hatred unopposed will inevitably flourish, we must be agents for understanding and compassion. If we, and the leaders of our country, perceive how basically similar we all are— in our needs, in our aspirations, and in our innate human dignity, then we will become *unite-ers*, and people will be drawn closer to one another. If, no matter our differences or how much distance appears to separate us, we are prepared to act upon the principle that we all deserve to be able to live respected and confident, — then our days will be bright.

Let these High Holidays help us to see more clearly— really see — how much all human beings share, and lead us to renew our dedication to the task of drawing close to our fellow human beings, just as we seek to draw closer to God this day. Then this will be a year in which good things are accomplished, one in which our faith in each other, as well as in the Lord, is strengthened, and one in which all our days will be filled with true and enduring blessing.

Amen