

Life-Size Encounters
Rosh Hashanah 5768
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While walking through an airport terminal some time back, I saw an advertisement that caught my attention. It was for BlackBerry, the mobile wireless device. The ad read, *Make all your clients one inch tall*. I don't want you to think I don't have a sense of humor. I do get it—it's cute, it's funny. But it disturbed me a bit. Not because I come to disparage the BlackBerry, or email of any kind for that matter. But rather, because the message is not limited to those who live a fast-paced, high-powered life in the corporate world. As I have reflected upon the phrase, I can see ways in which we can all do it. And I am not simply referring to email. I am talking about moments when, in the course of heavy loads of responsibility, of deadlines, of various sources of stress, we far too often fail to consider the humanity of each person we encounter. They each can become a name on a list to get checked off. A burden on our time. A wrench in our plan for how our lives and the world should function. This is not merely a work issue. Even our loved ones become one inch tall. I'd like to put up an ad, for the sake of myself and others, that says, "Make all of your encounters life-size."

When our son Lev was just under a year old, another young father said something that has stuck with me. We were sharing what we each loved about being a father. This is what he said about his relationship with his daughter: "I love how she holds me accountable for my attitude." He spoke of how much his attitude affected his daughter, how clearly he saw it in her. Since that conversation, this truth has been affirmed and reaffirmed in my experience. At times, my children reflect my attitude more clearly than I am able to see it in myself.

My friend did not simply say, though, “she helps me to notice my attitude,” or “she shows me where I need to work on myself” or “she helps me grow.” Each of those qualities is true about children, and each is a gift. But the language of “holding accountable” says something more. It suggests that he perceived himself to be *in service* of his daughter. The expression implies obligation. In other words, in his mind, his daughter demands that he shows up. And not just in action, but in attitude. Not merely externally, but internally.

I would propose that it is difficult, if not impossible, to be held accountable by someone who is only one inch tall. Acknowledging and embracing our accountability to another involves beholding that person in his or her full presence. To the extent that we reduce those around us, we forego the opportunity to be held accountable toward being the best people we can be.

Accountability is not rooted in fear. It does not entail worrying about whether someone will blame me if I mess up, or feeling guilty if I do not live up to someone’s expectations. We might think that it is at times healthy to reduce someone to one inch, for instance an overly critical boss in whose presence we are anxious and thus reduced ourselves. But cases such as these often entail the bully assuming a *larger* than life stature. Beholding that person life-size is actually not only a reduction in a quantitative sense, but is a qualitative shift that creates a new perception. Once a person is life-size, he is real. He is a person like the rest of us—vulnerable, insecure, and grasping to gather some solid ground under his feet. When we turn toward another in their life-size form, be they a difficult person in our life or a benefactor of love and wisdom, we meet them from a place of strength and compassion. It is here that real encounter occurs.

As I will share with you, I find parenting to be a wonderfully demanding venue for learning to show up in life. But there are, of course, a myriad of ways to engage in this learning, to orient oneself toward a life of being held accountable. Each of us, parents or not, is granted the opportunity daily—if we choose to accept it—to be held accountable for our attitude. By those we parent in some way or another, be they our actual children or not; by anyone we mentor or teach; or by any person with whom we forge a relationship involving trust and commitment of any kind. Parenting, like any relationship, does not automatically awaken us to this consciousness. There are plenty of ways, in fact, for us to avoid showing up when the opportunity presents itself. But when I wake up to living with awareness, as I aim to do every day despite stumbling, I realize that I am granted constant opportunities for accountability. Parenting, for me, provides the most frequent and intensive of these opportunities.

I shared a story during a Friday night service this past year, when our daughter Arava was about a year old. It involved my being frustrated at her waking up one evening after I had put her to sleep at the end of a long day. I was ready, as I shared at the time, to be done parenting for the day. Though I rocked her and sang to her gently, internally I was impatiently gripping and shushing. Then I woke up. I realized that this internal reality of mine, this attitude, was not helping the situation. I took a deep breath and adjusted her in my arms. In my mind I said, “However long you need to do this, I will be here with you.” I swayed and let go into the moment. It couldn’t have been more than ten seconds before she was quiet. I held her a little longer, then set her back down in bed.

The Hasidic master the *Sefat Emet* teaches that, before any action in service of holiness, we must gather our whole self and channel it into the action. According to the

Talmud, we each possess 248 limbs and sinews, corresponding to the 248 positive commandments revealed through the tradition. The notion being, expressed by the *Sefat Emet* among others, is that in order to serve God, we must do it with our entire selves. Not simply our mind, not simply our heart, not simply our body. But with our whole being.

I do not take this instruction to be lofty, esoteric, religious talk. In my mind, this is nuts and bolts. It speaks directly to what occurred that night with Arava. Once I glimpsed that I was being held accountable not merely for my actions but for my attitude, I surrendered. In order to sooth her, I was forced to show up completely, with my whole self. She refused to be simply a task for me to complete. She demanded my actual presence.

Martin Buber writes, “Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur” (63). We cannot truly meet another if we view that person as a means to an end. Kids demand it of us shamelessly. Adults are subtler. But when we behold our fellow human as an end in and of herself, we generally are met by a very different person in return.

I find that my best parenting happens when I choose in the moment to do nothing else but parent. When I am with my kids for a couple hours over dinner and bedtime while I sneak in a couple phone calls and run through in my head some ideas for my next class, the time inevitably unravels into chaos. I end up managing meltdowns and doing my best to stay patient amidst challenging behavior. When I take my time, when I drop all agenda and outside concern and simply give my attention and energy over to them, things much more often than not click into place.

I love being held accountable in this way, having attention and focus be demanded of me. But like the moth before the flame, we both long for and avoid accountability. To hold the pose of accountability is strenuous work. It can be exhausting and profoundly uncomfortable.

In her book *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich—citing her own journal entry—writes, “My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience.” When I read that sentence for the first time, I immediately flashed to a moment when Lev was about a year and a half old. I was cradling him during one of many heavily interrupted nights of sleep. For close to a year at that point, he had been waking up several times a night during most nights, often not easily comforted.

It was toward the latter part, although very much still in the midst, of this period. We were living in Jerusalem for the year, and were enduring a particularly challenging stretch of sleep. Lev would wake up screaming, and continue screaming and stretch his body forcefully as we attempted to calm him. In that moment, as I harnessed what felt like all my self-control to remain calm while my nerves raged inside, I experienced the following thought: “I wonder if, when Lev is older, I will remember how hard this was.” And then, “I wonder if I will ever tell him.”

This was Lev being life-size. No reduction, no minimization. No way out. This is me, he says. Are you here or not? And this is the accountability moment. Because, while at least within my reality, there was no physical way out, there was—and always is—a spiritual exit. It could be indifference, or anger, or despair. Each forms an emotional wall through which we disengage. In some situation in life, we’ve all been there. The disengagement helps us endure discomfort, gives us an out when life is holding us more

accountable than we would like to be held. It might feel better momentarily, but if we look closely and honestly the consequences are apparent.

In what is known as the second paragraph of the Shema, from Deuteronomy 11, we recite the following words: “If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Adonai your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late... Take care not to turn away to serve other gods and bow to them. For Adonai’s anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce.” For many contemporary Jews, this theology poses problems. The portrayal of a God who awaits our actions, rewarding the good and punishing the bad, does not match our life experience. However, passages such as this one proposed something radical at the time—that each of our individual actions concerns God. I might say in a less dramatic idiom that each of us has the potential to add to or detract from the holiness, or the goodness, that exists in the world. This affirmation is an antidote to the desire to disengage.

The Baal Shem Tov, the inspiration for the Hasidic movement, offers an interesting interpretation of this passage. He reads, “Take care not to turn away to serve other gods” as “Take care not to turn away *and in doing so* serve other gods.” In other words, the turning itself from the work and service of life—no matter where one turns to—is the idolatrous act. Each time we turn away, each time we check out, we in some way cut ourselves off from the flow of life. It is so easy to turn, however, again and again, because to stay involves discomfort, anxiety, and uncertainty.

Harriet Lerner describes her pregnancy and initial period of parenting as “a crash course in feeling totally vulnerable and helpless. Indeed, having children...is a life-long lesson in feeling out of control” (16). “To opt for kids is to opt for chaos, complexity, turbulence, and truth...They will..confront you with all the painful and unsavory emotions that humans put so much energy into trying to avoid” (24).

Life is a life-long lesson in feeling out of control. To opt for *life* is to opt for chaos, complexity, turbulence, and truth. Toward the end of Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites, “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, so that you and your offspring shall live.” Life for life’s sake. This is the life that is ours to choose. It is rarely ordered, or simple, or smooth. But faced with courage, it is true. It is an authentic expression of ourselves, of our world, and of the Divine. Norman Fischer asks, “Do I move into this moment of meeting, or do I shrink away from it because it may require too much of me?...responsibility appears as a willingness to move into what occurs with full attention, to move into each person, each event, each moment, good or bad, like it or not, and to take on each encounter as a challenge.”

When the accountability comes knocking, we often execute great skill in eschewing it. In not letting it truly affect us. Because it takes all of us—all 248 limbs and sinews, as it were—to respond to what Jon Kabat-Zinn calls “the poignant enormity of our life experience.” The poignant enormity. When I encounter that enormity in the face and life of another human being, how can allow myself to reduce it at all?

There are many reasons why, in the midst of our often-overwhelming lives, we do not choose life in this way. We are exhausted, we feel vulnerable, we are under stress. It’s all understandable. And even though at times we find the energy, muster the courage to

risk, navigate a way toward stability, we will stumble again. And again. But if we pay attention, another opportunity to “Choose life,” to embrace accountability, awaits us around the next corner.

Buber wrote, “All real living is meeting.” May our meetings in the year to come be life-size.

Shana Tovah