

Chadesh Yameynu: Seeing with New Eyes

A Rosh Hashana Eve Sermon Rabbi Yaron Kapitulnik |
Temple Judea | Palm Beach Gardens

I want to start this evening not with a text, not with a joke, not with a story. I want to start with a picture.

Look at it. What do you see?

Some of you see an elegant young woman in a feathered hat, turned away from you, her chin tilted toward her shoulder. And some of you see an old woman, her nose long, her chin tucked into a fur collar, her eyes cast down.

Look again.

Shift your gaze, tilt your head, look at it from a different angle - and the whole picture changes. Can you make your eyes move from the young woman to the old woman, and back again?

Notice - Nothing on the page changes. Not one line moves. What changes is you. The eye that first caught the curve of a jawline suddenly catches the curve of a nose. The mind that first detected youth suddenly detects age.

Psychologists have spent a century studying this image because it proves something unsettling. Two people can look at the exact same reality and see two entirely different things, and both will be right. The picture does not lie to either of them.

Tonight, I want to suggest that Rosh Hashana asks us exactly what this picture asks.

It asks us to question our perspective.
It asks us to question what we believe are our absolute truths. To wonder if what we are seeing is really the only possible reality.

The ten days, beginning tonight and leading to Yom Kippur, challenge us to look with new eyes at a familiar reality. To train our eyes to notice what habit, ego and complacency has caused us to overlook.
To remember that while the world around us may not change, we can see it through a different lens.

Tonight, we started wishing each other a “Shana Tova” - A Good Year. But this greeting misses the mark. It does not truly capture the true meaning of this sacred moment.

I believe that the greeting we should all use tonight and into the future comes from the Hebrew word CHADESH - NEW.

And I say this because the word Chadesh appears in our HHD liturgy over and over again. Time after time we will be singing (sing) "*Chadesh Yameinu Ka'kedem.*"

You know these words. They are not only part of our High Holy Day liturgy. They are the words we sing every single time the Torah is returned to the ark.

Listen again closely to these words.

(sing) "*Chadesh Yameinu Ka'kedem.*"

In most Machzorim they are translated as "Renew our days as of old" - as if it were a petition to return to some glorious time in the past. A golden age we miss so much.

But that is not what the prayer truly means. A better translation is this:

Make our days new again.

We are not asking God for new days.

We are asking God to see each day in a new light.

Same spouse. Same children. Same job. Same aging body. Same family history. Same regrets. Same dreams. Same disappointments. All in a new light. With clarity that can lead to a new understanding, a deeper appreciation, and a greater determination to see what we might have lost sight of.

The invitation of this day is not to erase any of it and start over on a blank page. The invitation is to look again, and

to notice what we might have missed. To allow our open hearts to reveal what was hidden by our pride, by our stubbornness, by our inflated egos.

One of the reasons Jews chose to wear white clothes during this sacred period is because the white clothes represent the ability to imagine our days, our actions, our relationships, in a new way. Like whiteout on a page. What you originally wrote is still there underneath. But now you can write again, above it.

It is not easy. But it is possible. We are the masters of how we tell our stories.

Which reminds me of the two shoe salesmen who were sent by their company to the same remote village. The first one arrived, looked around, and immediately sent a telegram home. The situation is hopeless. Nobody here wears shoes. The second one arrived, looked around, and sent his own telegram. Enormous opportunity. Nobody here has shoes yet.

Same village. Same bare feet. Two telegrams.

But all laughter aside, here is a vastly different story-one that has stayed with me for a long time.

It comes from a memoir written by the psychologist and Holocaust survivor Edith Eger, called *The Choice*. In it she tells about the day she and her younger sister

Magda arrived at Auschwitz. Their heads were shaved and their clothes were taken by the Nazis, along with everything that had ever told them who they were.

At a certain point, Magda turned to Edith and asked her one question. “How do I look?” And she added, “tell me the truth.”

Edith could have told her the truth. That she looked like a stranger to herself, sheared and stripped in a place built to erase every trace of humanity. Instead, Edith looked into her sister's face and said, “you have beautiful eyes. I never noticed them before when your hair was always in the way.”

In the very worst hour of both their lives, Edith did not pretend that hour was anything other than what it was. She simply chose, inside that hour, what to see. She saw her sister's eyes.

Viktor Frankl, who survived those same camps, wrote afterward that everything can be taken from a human being except one thing. The last of human freedoms. The freedom to choose how you will see what is happening to you, and who you will remain while it happens.

Can we see beauty even in the darkest places we encounter? Can we turn to God and say: *Chadesh Yameinu Ka'kedem*, please God, give us the ability to see those beautiful eyes?

Can we try this year to be a little more like Rabbi Akiva? The Talmud tells us that Akiva was walking one day with his colleagues near the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem, decades after its destruction. As they approached, a fox darted out from the place where the Holy of Holies had once stood.

The other rabbis began to weep. This was the place where God's presence had dwelled among the people, and now foxes ran freely through the rubble.

But Rabbi Akiva laughed.

His friends were stunned. How could he laugh at such devastation? And Akiva answered that the prophets had foretold both the destruction and, in the very same breath, the rebuilding. Now that I have seen the prophecy of destruction fulfilled with my own eyes, he said, I know with certainty that the prophecy of restoration will be fulfilled as well.

Same ruins. Same fox. His colleagues saw an ending. Akiva saw a promise still in motion. Nothing about the rubble changed. What changed was the story he allowed himself to see inside it.

When a door closes in our lives, when a loved one is gone, when a relationship ends, when we can no longer do something on our own, can we see a beginning where everyone around us sees an end?

None of these people were asked to pretend their circumstances were different than they were.

The ruins were still ruins. The shaved head was still a shaved head. The camp was still the camp. Nobody handed any of them a new set of facts. What they found, each in their own way, was a new set of eyes.

The next time you look in the mirror, and you see the reflection of someone getting older. Will you be able to look into the eyes of that wise and experienced person looking back at you and realize how unique the blessing of old age is? The person you see has survived everything life has thrown at them so far. Those wrinkles are not a testament of anything lost - They are a record of wisdom and experience.

Someone you love has a habit that drives you crazy. The way they tell a story. The way they never throw anything out. The way they are always late. You know they will not change; they have tried a hundred times. But can you change your perspective? Maybe realize that the very thing that drives you crazy is also what makes them who they are, the person you love. Is there a possibility that this habit can become what makes them even more endearing in your eyes?

And when the day comes when the doctor, or your children, tell you it is time to stop driving. When the first reaction you feel is a punch in your stomach - like this is the moment in which you are about to lose your

independence. A tragedy. Can you shift your vision and see an opportunity? Think of Miss Daisy. Somebody else worries about the traffic now. Somebody else looks for parking. You get to be driven everywhere, and the person driving you may turn out to be the best company you have had in years.

The phone rings and it is your aging parent, telling you the same story for the tenth time. You sigh before you even answer. Can you adopt a new perspective? That story is the last living archive of your family. And one day the phone will not ring.

Your child did not become who you planned. The doctor who became a chef. The lawyer who became a yoga teacher, the one who moved far away. The one who chose a different path, a different partner, a different faith for their children, or no faith at all. Can you see the beauty in the person they became instead of the one you imagined?

The ex, the former friend, the sibling you no longer speak to. You have told that story one way for so many years, and it only has one version, and, in that version, you are the hero. Look again - there is another version of that story being told, you tell it and see a young woman, they tell it and see an older woman - is it possible you are not just the hero but are also a different character in their version?

And the empty chair at the holiday table this year. You see only the loss. This is the hardest of perceptions to change, still try, gently. Can you also see that you were given someone worth grieving this much?

I want to share with you a moment in which I had to change my perspective this past year, and while it was not as significant as an empty chair or a shaved head, it was a pivotal moment not only in my life but the story of this congregation.

When the question of leadership at Temple Judea came before us, everyone knew the picture. Everyone had seen it the same way for a hundred years. A congregation has a senior rabbi. One person at the top. One voice. One final word. That is how it is done, that is how it has always been done, and there is a whole industry of consultants and search committees built around it.

And so, when Rabbi Josh and I began to talk about a different model, about two rabbis standing side by side as equals, sharing this pulpit and sharing this responsibility, many people cautioned us. Good people. People who love this congregation. People who love us. "It will not work," they said. "Two rabbis cannot share. Somebody must be in charge. Somebody always ends up in charge. You are setting yourselves up for conflict, for confusion, for failure.

They were looking at the same lines we were looking at.
They saw one face. We tilted our heads.

We decided that the question was not which of us will be the senior rabbi. The question was, what does this community need, and what would it look like if we stopped assuming the answer? Same congregation. Same pulpit. Same eight hundred plus households. Same rabbis. But once we allowed ourselves to see it differently, a whole new picture was sitting there in the same lines, waiting for us.

I am not standing here tonight to tell you we have it all figured out. I can tell you the last two months have been an awesome experience, but what I want you to remember tonight is that the hardest part was not doing it. The hardest part was allowing ourselves to see it.

So as the shofar calls us into a new year - I want to leave you with two things this evening,

The first is a gesture. Look at the picture one more time.

Now tilt your head. Actually, do it.

Find the other face.

Some of you just found her for the first time tonight.

For the next ten days, that is the whole practice. When you catch yourself absolutely certain about someone, certain about a situation, certain about yourself, tilt your head.

Not to change the facts.

But rather to find the other face.

Somewhere in your life right now there is a picture you have only ever seen one way.

Look at it again.

See the wisdom and the beauty in an aging face.

See the uniqueness in that annoying habit.

See the doors that open when others close.

See the gift in the story you have heard a million times.

See the real person your loved one has become.

See the humility in a story told differently than you remember it.

And see the blessing in being able to feel such pain, for that pain was born of love, and only a heart that has loved deeply can ache so much.

The second is to use a new word. In Israel, when someone gets something new, a haircut, a shirt, a car, you do not say congratulations. You say Titchadesh to a male and Titchadshi to a female. It shares the same root as our prayer Chadash Yameinu: chet, dalet, shin. Literally, to be made new.

But notice something. Israelis only say it about new things. Tonight, I want you to say it about the things you already have. The same spouse. The same body. The same children. The same challenges, the same aches and pains, the same congregation. The same life you walked in here with. Titchadesh. Titchadshi - May you be made new inside the life you already have.

When you say Titchadesh or Titchadshi to someone, you are wishing them more than a new year. You are wishing them a new set of eyes, a fresh way of seeing what they were certain could only be seen one way.

You are wishing them the ability to look at their lives, at their reality with a little more mercy, a little more gratitude, a little more willingness to be surprised by what we find when we look again.

You are not asking them to deny reality.
I am not asking you to deny reality.

I am asking you to consider that your head might not be tilted at the right angle. And that there might be another angle available. One that has been sitting in the very same lines the whole time, waiting for you to tilt your head and look again.

This year, may we all find the courage to look again, and the grace to see something new.

Shana Tova Umetuka. May you be inscribed for a good and sweet year. Titchadshu.