

**Rabbi Kenneth Chasen**

**“Together and Alone”**

**October 7, 2011**

**Yom Kippur 5772**

This will probably come as a surprise to most if not all of you, but in high school, I was not what you'd call particularly popular with the ladies. Oh sure, there was the occasional youth group Shabbaton to look forward to, but in my everyday life in a high school of almost 2000 souls, I – a budding musician, a champion debater, and with a first driver's license that listed me accurately at 5' 1" and 92 pounds – I was not considered either by my female classmates or by Charles Darwin to be optimal mating material.

So whenever a member of the fairer sex actually did acknowledge my existence, my reactions ranged from elation to disbelief to nausea. Still, I always remained convinced that I was just one cosmetic enhancement away from changing the narrative. And since I was already putting away about 5000 calories a day to produce the muscle mass of Olivia Newton John, I figured my physique was not going to be my ticket to the Promised Land. But I knew what was. It was the late 1970's. I needed to grow long hair. Down-to-my-shoulders long hair – the kind of long hair the center on our school's basketball team had. I needed to look just like him.

My parents were skeptical about the effectiveness of this plan. But I was insistent. The hair was the key. So they let me grow it out. And when I looked in the mirror, I saw John Travolta. I whipped out my big comb with the long handle from the back pocket of my jeans, feathering that long brown hair perfectly into place... and watching it all fall back down straight like John Denver's... and it didn't even matter. I was ready for prime time.

So I asked my mom to take me out shopping for the kind of rugged attire befitting an edgy character such as myself. We walked into the teen department at Macy's, and I had barely started sifting through the racks when the young saleswoman, maybe twenty-five or so, *noticed* me. She flashes me this big smile. And then she says to my mom, “So what size is your daughter?”

It was not a good moment. My new, much cooler, much more appealing image of myself dissolved in that instant. My excitement about how others were seeing and experiencing me transformed into disappointment, embarrassment, confusion, and, yes, nausea. I'd been forced to look at myself in the mirror and see my outward self at least not as I wished others saw me, but as I actually was.

Yom Kippur is that mirror we hold up to ourselves each year. And here, of course, I'm not talking about our outward appearances. Our job on this day is to see *ourselves* for who we truly are, and then commit ourselves to making the changes we need to make, so that we can actually become the people we aspire to be.

This requires the deepest kind of self-examination, what our tradition calls *cheshbon hanefesh* – a careful examination of our behavior... a sober, cold, long, uncomfortable look in the mirror... a look into our own souls. What are we, really, in the depths? In the very core of our being? Are we as kind as we'd like to think? Are we as giving? As loving? As patient?

The first and perhaps most critical step of becoming our best selves – the people we'd like to see smiling back at us in the mirror – is knowing right now who we really and truly are.

Now, that shouldn't be all that hard for us to see, looking directly into the mirror. But it turns out that there are a few things that get in the way of our seeing ourselves clearly. And the most fundamental challenge, it seems, is not a failure of our will. It's a failure of vision and perception on our part. That is, part of the reason we don't see ourselves for who we truly are is that it is actually quite challenging for us to see and understand the world around us as it actually is, much less our inner selves.

You might have seen the recent book by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons, entitled *The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us*. The title comes from a famous experiment which you can actually watch on YouTube – just not during this sermon, please. The study revealed that if people are shown a video of other people passing a basketball back and forth, and then are asked to count how many times the basketball is passed, about half of the watchers will fail to notice a person in a gorilla suit walking in and out of the scene thumping his chest.

Impossible, right? But no. New research delving further into this phenomenon shows that even people who know that such an otherwise unexpected event is going to occur will miss other unforeseen events – and may even be worse at noticing them – than those who aren't expecting the unexpected.

We are just not as good at seeing and noticing as we think we are.

We're also not very good, it turns out, at judging how well we understand what we see. Most of us, not surprisingly, imagine that we see and understand things, including ourselves, much, much better than we actually do. And here I'm not just talking about "understanding" in the grander, conceptual sense. I'm talking simple understanding.

Case in point: psychologist Rebecca Lawson asked people who claimed to have a good understanding of how bicycles work (because they ride them every day) to draw a picture of a bicycle, including all of the key elements of the bike. Most proved unable even to draw the chain and pedals in the correct location.

It's really hard to believe. But it seems that we are in fact quite impaired when it comes to seeing and understanding even the most concrete, basic, physical realities that surround us. And studies have shown again and again that we are often quite unaware of our own limitations in this arena. So not only can't we see and understand very well, we are largely unaware of how poorly we see and understand, which of course makes us rather dangerous creatures. We don't know what we don't know.

And so, if you think we have a hard time seeing the world as it truly is... seeing the things that are right before our eyes as they truly are... how well do you think we manage to see ourselves as we truly are?

The spiritual exercise that has brought us all here tonight – our plan to devote this one full day on the Jewish calendar to a deeply honest examination of our souls – that plan is impeded mightily by what Dr. Cordelia Fine calls our "vain brain." It seems that scientists now concur that our brains automatically enhance our strengths and send us a steady stream of messages that we are better than our peers. This is a base reflex. It happens on the most fundamental and subconscious level. Example: a renowned Belgian psychologist, Jozef Nuttin, demonstrated rather incredibly that our brains consider the letters that appear in our own names to be more physically attractive than the letters that don't. That's how programmed we are to see ourselves in the most favorable light.

So our brains latch onto our virtues and embellish them. And when it comes to our weaknesses, our brains go to great lengths to excuse them. In fact, our brains often rewrite our failures straight out of our personal histories. It's as if they never happened.

Now, this may seem to be a horrific and dangerous statement about human nature. But the truth is that this psychological hard-wiring plays a critical role in both our surviving and our thriving. Our vain brains help us to weather humiliations and disappointments. They make us resilient when we might otherwise give up. And, as Dr. Fine writes,

“Sometimes your vain brain manages to transform its grandiose beliefs into reality. Buoyed by a brain that loves you like a mother, you struggle and persevere – happily blind to your own inadequacies, arrogantly dismissive of likely obstacles – and actually achieve your goals.”

So the vain brain is not all bad. But it does suggest that we’re just not built as well as we think we are to “do” Yom Kippur. We have to transcend something that is entrenched in the very core of our humanity to pull this repentance thing off.

Now, my guess is that some of you are already rebelling from that thought. “I am a more sophisticated being than that,” you reason. “I am intelligent. I am self-aware. I work very hard on my shortcomings.” And you know what? It could all be true. But on this day of ultimate honesty, how can we be sure that all of that isn’t just the clatter of our vain brains doing their thing?

After all, being smart, well-read and highly motivated will not protect you from the exploits of your vain brain. Two Princeton researchers once gathered a group of students and gave each of them a fabricated, but very official-sounding scientific article to read. Half were given one article, which claimed that being extroverted is the key to academic success, while the other half were given a different article, which seemed to prove that introversion is the secret to success. The only thing that the two groups of students had in common is that they all were enrolled at Princeton, and they did not get there by thinking that they didn’t have what it takes to succeed. Whichever personality trait was identified as the magic “success” elixir in the article that they read – that’s the trait that they rated themselves more highly as possessing. Smart... well-read... highly motivated... and self-deluding, just like us.

No, we’re just not built very well to do Yom Kippur. We have to transcend something that is entrenched in the very core of our humanity to pull this repentance thing off. So if not eating for this full day... or rising and sitting again and again... or working your way through all these long worship services is, in your estimation, what makes this day hard, perhaps you’re not trying hard enough.

On this holy day, we repent for, among other things, the sins that we condemn in others but tolerate in ourselves. Sounds tough. But the sins that come readily to mind... the ones we’ve repented over for years before... the ones we’re already willing to admit we tolerate in ourselves – that’s supposed to be the easy stuff. My concern on this Day of Atonement is not the sin we condemn in others but *tolerate* in ourselves. My concern is the sin we condemn in others and *deny* in ourselves. That’s the “hard” in this day.

Joseph Soloveitchik, the 20<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic giant known simply as the Rav, figured us out even before the social scientists did. He saw that the hard part of repentance is coming to terms with the sins we deny, no matter how much our spouses or children or friends or coworkers tell us about them. He wrote: “(We humans are) stubborn by nature and build fences within (ourselves), sometimes refusing to acknowledge facts and denying harsh reality. We instinctively reject facts that are unfavorable and unpleasant to us... God instilled in (us) a mechanism of self-defense which enables (us) to ignore facts, to flee from reality, to deny its existence and to avoid seeing things as they are. A (person) may know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he has sinned and is diverted from his life’s goal... He (may) even know why – but is not ready to say so openly or to hear it from others.”

So what won’t *you* hear from others? What is the shortcoming of which you are reminded consistently, but choose *not* to address on this day? Is it the bad temper that pains your loved ones – a temper that you go further than just defending... you deny that you have it at all? Is it your response when someone who needs your love laments your emotional unavailability, and you say, “Come on, that’s not true. I’m always here to help.” Is it your determination to protect some self-narrative – of generosity... or of honesty... or of humility – such that you simply tell yourself again and again that you *are*... when deep inside, in a place that you might not even be able to find, you know you’re *not*.

Finding even one such sin... and unearthing it from where it is deeply buried by your vain brain... that is the “hard” of this day. That’s the one thing we generally preclude from our consideration, while we recite the same old lists of sins... the ones that have become almost comfortable to bemoan... the ones we admit.

What if we decided to make this Yom Kippur different? Not just the same lists of sins in the prayer book. Not just the same lists of sins in our lives – the ones we have come to accept as chronic, like arthritis in our fingers. What if this year we chose to blaze the most difficult trail of all on this Shabbat Shabbaton, this Sabbath of all Sabbaths? What if we chose to spend this day battling our base reflex to deny that one failing that hurts the most to let in?

If we are to have any realistic hope of transcending our vain brains, we’ll need to take advantage of the unique riches afforded us on Yom Kippur. After all, there is a beautiful and instructive tension inherent in this day – a tension that can help us to see ourselves more clearly. On the one hand, this is a day devoted to community, to standing together as a congregation as we recite our confession in the first person plural: “For the sin that *we* have sinned against You...” – we, as a community, as a people... we, humanity... have fallen short.

But on the other hand, this is a day devoted to the self, to the individual as she wrestles with her own conscience, as she bares her own soul and commits herself to doing better in the year to come.

The first line we read from the Torah each year on Yom Kippur morning highlights the communal aspect of this day. We read: “You stand this day, ALL OF YOU, before the Eternal your God – *Atem nitzavim hayom KULCHEM lifnei Adonai Eloheichem.*”

We stand today, all of us, before the One from whom there is no hiding or lying... the One who sees us as we truly are... the One we call *Yodea kol-nistarot* – the Knower of secrets.

Now, that may be a challenging image for you religiously. But whatever your theology... whatever you do or don't believe about God... open yourself up to the metaphor for just a moment. Imagine a world created and governed by a loving God. A God who wants us to embrace the good, to become our best selves. A God for whom we need not posture, for our frailty is not shameful... it is human. A God who sees through the facade, through all of the layers of self-protective fiction, into our very souls, where we yearn so deeply to be what we always imagine ourselves to be.

This past month or so – the final month of the Jewish year, culminating with these High Holy Days – we've been on the Jewish journey back to everything we might become in the company of that kind of God. *T'shuvah* – repentance – is the process of self-examination and self-improvement that enables us to return, welcomed by that kind of affirming presence.

That's what it means to “stand before God” on this Day of Atonement. That's how this day could be different. That's how we can get to acknowledging that one failing that we never admit... not even to ourselves.

We read: *ATEM nitzavim* – YOU ALL stand today before the Eternal Your God. Rabbi Aharon ben Asher, the 19th century Hassidic Rebbe of Karlin in Belarus, taught that “The word ‘*atem*’ – you all – is formed from the same letters as the word ‘*emet*’ – truth. Truth is what enables us to journey (back to everything we might become). It is through truth – the unvarnished, unashamed truth – that we merit to present ourselves before the Judge of the Universe on these Days of Awe.”

Yes, we stand together today as a collective – *ATEM*. But it's not a crowd for hiding in. We gather in the strength of these numbers to face the real truth – *EMET* – the real truth of who we are individually. We are here together, and yet, in this journey of return, in

the most profound, frightening and beautiful of ways, we are alone. No shame. No secrets. Just us, standing alone, feeling the kind of presence that allows us finally to utter the unutterable: “This is what I have long denied. This is what I have refused to hear. This is what I am ready to confess.”

Here we are – together and alone. Together in community. Alone with our truths. *ATEM* and *EMET*. It won’t be easy, for as physicist Richard Feynman said, “The first principle is you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.” But we didn’t come here on Yom Kippur for the easy. We came for the hard. Otherwise, why come? We’re here to find out: What might this day create in our lives – the rest of our lives – if this year, we are bold enough and honest enough to admit just *one single truth* about ourselves that we have long denied, and then, having admitted it, we begin the trek toward transcending it? What might this day create in our lives... in our marriages... in our parenting... in our business... in the broken shards of relationships that we continue to call whole?

Said Mark Twain, “A (person) is never more truthful than when he acknowledges himself a liar.” Together and alone... let this be an uncommonly truthful day.

*Written collaboratively with my study partner, Rabbi Josh Zweiback, Director of the Year-in-Israel Program of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.*