

From the Rabbi

December 2016/Kislev 5777

“Facing Off and Facing Toward”

It was Martin Buber who proposed that “all life is meeting.” (Though it is rumored – and corroborated by Kaplan in his diary entries about “meeting” Buber – that Buber was unnervingly shy and unforthcoming in person.) His point, however, was well taken, at least in the theological-philosophical sense he intended: We meet God (or Godliness, if you prefer) only through true dialogue with others.

But which others?

Our family and friends, for sure. (How many weddings and funerals have I conducted where I had to be briefed by family members to beware of the relatives who haven’t spoken to one another in twenty years?)

Our colleagues, co-workers, co-religionists, of course. (The Talmudic rabbis have their own term for the backbiting jealousy expressed by one colleague toward another, apparently because it was so common among them.)

The people who live in our neighborhood; our fellow parents in our kids' schools; the merchants we regularly see on our shopping rounds? Yes and yes and yes. ("Hi, how are ya? Fine, and you? Great, great. Great weather, huh? Yeah, but the cold's due tomorrow. Well, bundle up. And happy holidays. To you, too. Take care. Be well. Ciao.")

Ah, but those whose cohorts we are not part of? Those who pray differently, look different, eat differently, *vote* differently from us?

Now it gets harder. Now Buber's lovely observation turns out to be a down-and-dirty challenge to our core. Dialogue is essential, but oh so difficult. Meeting is a must, but it is only so because it is like approaching the inner sanctum of all existence. It is off-putting, dangerous, and devastating. It requires us to think, to self-evaluate, to

count to ten in every language we know, including essential non-verbal languages.

When we complain bitterly about the state of our national electorate (and this year the winners and losers seem to be complaining with equal ferocity); when we *geshrei* that others across the expanse of our country and world view us with bigoted eyes; when we lament that social and political rhetoric have left us in a state of fear and mistrust – there are small steps we can take which will not “solve” the biggest of our problems, but which will perhaps tack us in the right direction.

Those steps involve *meeting*. We must cease expecting anyone to think of us in three-dimensional, un-horned terms unless they have actually met us – and us them – face to face. *Panim el Panim*, as our Torah puts it so poetically.

This sort of meeting does not necessarily create warmth. It does not produce instant *gemutlichkeit*. It may actually increase animosity and reinforce stereotypes. But it is better than what we have now.

My fellow religious leaders – and we are *so* different from one another in terms of what we mean by religion, faith, prayer – have been coming together more and more in the past year or so. We have been hearing the gathering storm of hateful speech in the land, and we have been anticipating the need to know one another better; to trust one another more fully, lest anything happen to one of our flocks that would require the assistance of the rest of us. We have made lists of one another’s cell numbers and email addresses. We have visited one another’s houses of worship and broken bread together. We have begun to recognize one another on the street.

In short, we have started the work we should have begun long ago. We have laid the groundwork for our fellow Americans – fellow humans – to get to know each other; perhaps in some cases to begin *disliking* each other, but to do so in an honest and accepting way.

Clergy people can lead the charge up to a point. But in a country not as rooted in religious affiliation as it once was, a range of secular leaders must step up if widespread dialogue and meeting are to become the way of the land. Police and firefighters, school teachers and administrators,

elected and appointed officials, business and professional personalities, political leaders from enemy camps – all must learn to take off their “game face” and put on their *true* face. All must find ways to meet, to confer, to ask hard questions and hear hard answers.

The way to un-divide a divided nation is not to come together in agreement. It is to come together in the commonality of our differences. It is to swear allegiance to one another’s basic humanity (or, to return to our Buberian terminology, to acknowledge the Godly “thou” in one another). It is to promise to take care of one another in the face of all hateful and violent speech and action, even as we hold fast to deeply held principles that may contradict those of our newfound interlocutors. This will only happen when all sorts of individuals use their connections and their ingenuity to organize such get-togethers: in houses of worship, community centers, schools, what have you.

In Westchester County, law enforcement people, clergy, politicians, and business and professional folk have agreed to create a public “photo op” on the site of each and every instance of bias or bigotry as it occurs (*chalilah, heaven forbid*). We have put one another on call. We have

sworn to show up to have our picture taken and sent out across the viral-sphere whenever anyone crosses the line of decency in our backyard. We have taken on the motto “Not in Our Towns” as a necessary negative that implies a greater positive.

We have also promised to meet more often, to get to know one another better *without* waiting for an emergency to call us together.

A closing Buber-inspired thought: When the divine presence appears to Moses at the burning bush, Moses turns aside rather than show disrespect for the fearsome deity who calls to him. But by the end of his life, he has learned that the true way to meet the divine is to turn *forward – panim el panim* – “face to face” with the loving one who calls. Only then can he come to grips with his own self, and only then can he comprehend the upending challenge that life has posed to him. So it is with us.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein