

## **It's Picture Day**

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When we lived in Colorado, we used to ride on a weehoo, a bike trailer with a red seat. We loved our weehoo... One sunny fall morning, when it seemed warm until we were actually outside, Ari and I took the weehoo to preschool at the synagogue where we worked about three miles from home.

It didn't take long – just long enough that turning back was not an option — for him to say, “I'M COLD, MOMMY.” So the whole rest of the ride — usually full of singing and laughter — Ari is shivering and silent and I am of course worried and feeling guilty.

Three more minutes, Ari!

Two more minutes!

Count to ten and we will be warm again!!

We arrive to the promise of hot tea only to find ...

**IT'S Picture day.**

... Not only is my son late, cold and helmet-haired but the whole class is outside waiting for the rabbi's kid. At that point the voice inside my head changes from a quiet I-am-a-bad-mommy hum into a loud shout No jacket AND late for picture day!?

Yet just beyond the busy judging mind, there were wonderful things to witness:

A mom wrapping Ari in a blanket, the teacher holding him during the picture, 35 children and their proud teachers in the golden morning sunlight.

Ari seemed to bounce back when he warmed up but I continued to wonder if this would be one of those you'll-pay-for-it-later -in-therapy moments.

After school, I asked Ari, "How was picture day?" and he said, "I loved

it! It was great! I was just wondering if Miss Ilene was cold.” Later, he added: “I took a picture by myself after and it was in the sun and I was warm.” Relieved, I reflected on how quickly I forgave *him* for refusing to bring his jacket and how quickly he *seemed* to forgive me for making him late.

What persisted most prominently was the harsh self-judging and the assumption that others were judging me as well. In the Talmud it is written that God makes a judgment about whether or not we have lived a righteous life over the past year. The righteous ones are immediately inscribed into the Book of Life, the wicked are “blotted out forever” and the *beynonim* — us guys in the middle — are allotted ten days, until Yom Kippur, to repent and become righteous. God sits upon a high and lofty throne, while books containing the deeds of all humanity are opened for review.

We make judgments all the time. It's part of being human, and it's part of how we are able to live in the world. Maybe we can learn something, a more helpful vision of the nature of God's judgment.

On Rosh Hashana it isn't the "shaking finger tsk tsk" fear-inducing judgment. Maybe it's the witnessing Self of the universe — getting a full picture of us. The widest, most vast and deepest understanding of a human being. And we, like God, engage in the practice of taking a wide- and deep-angle picture of ourselves — this is what the next ten days are all about.

On Picture Day, I was doing the "tsk tsk" judging and expecting it from others but I denied myself compassion and understanding; the fuller picture is that it was a hard morning and there's compassion. Till today, I don't actually know the full picture of what Ari's experience was. I can form a snapshot of a bad mom or I can form a snapshot of a kid who had a great day while learning about caring and feeling the warmth of the sun and his community.

Rosh Hashanah is real picture day.

The difference between taking a snapshot and taking a Rosh Hashanah picture is that on Rosh Hashanah we search ourselves

deeply. Our actions come into the frame, our speech, our relationships with our loved ones and with God; all of these come into the frame.

What has been the nature of our judgments of ourselves and others?

The custom of dipping apples in honey can be an exercise in helping us do what the Kabbalists call *hamtakat ha-din* — sweetening Judgment. The apple represents the world — including ourselves — and the honey, sweetness of course. *Hamtakat ha din* — sweetening judgment — is the practice of compassionate discernment. It's the holiday of lessening the negative self-talk, which in turn will make you speak more gently with others, take a moment after the inevitable snapshot to find compassion.

*VAHAVATA LREICHA KAMOCHA*. “Love the other as oneself” starts with the self.

Can we in this coming year be a little sweeter — especially with those who we find ourselves quick to judge harshly — starting with ourselves? Even as we engage in the important process of judging our

actions for their true merits, and working for justice in the world, we can widen the lens and take deeper pictures.

In Pirke Avot, the ethics of our fathers, it is written *dan et Chavercha bcaf zhut* — Judge the other meritoriously. Reb Zusya, a Hasidic master, said: “If only I could love the most righteous person in the world as much as God loves the most wicked.”

In a world of radical acceptance, as our synagogue aspires to be, a place of non-judgment, it's easier to hold up the mirror of discernment to look inward and then *change* what actually needs changing.

What about the snapshots others are taking of you...?

Yes, they *are* taking snapshots of you. All the time.

Our over-concern with what other people think of us causes so much suffering. HOW MUCH ENERGY ARE WE PUTTING INTO WORRYING ABOUT THE SNAPSHOTS THEY HAVE OF US? How have we allowed fear to impede our courage to speak the truth, our confidence to be creative, and our openness to love? It used to be

that when you didn't fit into the group you really *didn't* survive. Now we are left with the fear of not fitting in *as if* our survival depended on it. Being part of the group is important. But seeking approval and being afraid of being different — these are simply thoughts that we can practice releasing.

Next week we will stand as a community for the ultimate picture day. The haunting Kol Nidre prayer strips us of all identities. Not family member. Not co-worker. Not boss. Not 7th grader. Defenseless, we stand before our creator.

The declaration is sung three times. Each repetition is an invitation to look more deeply into the frame of ourselves and our loved ones, to release harsh judgment and bring compassion. Just after we finish Kol Nidre, the liturgy alludes to the story of the spies who return from surveying the Promised Land before the Israelites enter. The spies bring back false reports that are based on fear rather than faith. Their perception is distorted.

In the moment of greatest renewal and potential, we stand without pretense side by side with our community also standing without pretense.

At that very moment we are reminded that we will inevitably, as humans do, distort reality and take snapshots.

Yet as our various identities return and we forge ahead with new promises, our snapshots don't have to be the whole story. There is a great release when this happens and this is why Yom Kippur — the culmination of weeks of spiritual work — is one of the most joyful days of the year.

But what about the day after Yom Kippur? Judging more sweetly requires contemplative practice. Slowing down, sitting still and watching the nature of the mind.

On Rosh Hashanah morning we say the words *HA MELECH YOSHEV AL KISEY RAM v'NISAH*. The king SITS ON a HIGH AND



LOFTY THRONE. *MELECH* — kingship – or *MALCHUT*— queenship — represents divine goodness flowing from above to below. We intend that THE ONE WHO DISCERNS WITH GREAT COMPASSION will once again rule in our lives and move through the world without resistance.

Once again we pray, let us use all of our beings — heart, mind, body, spirit — to take a deeper look, to discern, WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MOMENT? AND THIS ONE? AND THIS ONE? Where is God in this face? And that one? And this one?

The philosopher Martin Buber framed the relationship in which there is respect for the divinity in the other, as I – Thou instead of I — It. Rather than objectifying, we encounter. Rather than judging, we engage.

The Rosh Hashanah honey represents the sweetness of unconditional love and seeing reality through God's eyes — with radical acceptance. This is so sweet. And this is what the world

needs. It starts with each of us moving deeper into the love underlying  
— in our version of picture day.

In my case, panning out to see a larger frame allows compassion for a  
busy rabbi mom — who sometimes has executive functioning  
challenges — biking my toddler to preschool.

Panning out, compassion arises.

Focusing deeper, we find love.

Meditation.

Moments in my life that I really screwed up.

Pan out. There's compassion.

Go deeper.

There's love.

—

The fuller and deeper picture we have, the more we understand, and  
the better judgments we make.

God doesn't literally open a book and judge our actions, yet we can all

hear the call to show up for picture day with our messy helmet hair. The whole class stands with *their* snapshots and *their* stories — and we *are* judged — seen, challenged and held deeply and completely in our fullness. *This* is the spiritual potential of the *yamim noraim*- the days of awe.

May the judgments be sweetened, and may the compassion and forgiveness flow easily in 5784.

### **Meditation For the Apples**

When you dip your apple in honey say:

*Y'hee ratzon mee-l'fanekha, Adonai Elohaynu v'elohey avoteynu  
sh'tichadeish aleinu shanah tovah um'tukah.*

May it be Your will, Adonai, our God and the God of our ancestors, that You renew for us a good and sweet year.

As you slowly taste the honey, allow it to sweeten your judging thoughts one at a time.

Moment by moment by moment, may we be written and sealed into the Book of Life for a life of meaning and a life of enduring and

unprecedented sweetness.

*Shana tova.*