

High Holy Days: A Vista Point for the Soul

A friend of mine recently told me about the regular trip he takes to Reno and about the drive from Ventura: I'm always rushing to make good time, and there's a sign along the road that says, turnoff to Lake in 2 miles. I know there is this beautiful lake right there, all I have to do is turn off the road, but I always feel like I have to get to Reno. The last time I actually turned off to see the view, my oldest son was a small child. He's almost 30 now, and we never turned off again, not with him or any of his siblings that came after him.

As my friend told me this story, I thought of a poem I'd recently read called Vista Points, by Caryl Hurtig Casbon. Here is the poem- and you are welcome to close your eyes to visualize:

Vista Points

She rounds the sharp curve towards the summit,
driving uncounted miles on a mountain road,
focus on the center line, potholes,
not knowing east from west.

A sign appears:

Vista Point, ¼ mile.

The promise of a dirt island off-highway
to pause, take a snapshot or two.

Torn, she wants the view, a break,
but also to drive on, make good time,
arrive by sundown.

She pulls over,
opens the car door, places
one leg on the ground
as she peaks over the railing.

The mountain lake below comes to view,
shimmering as the wind and sun
ripple and illuminate its surface,
opening her heart instantly to splendor,
now facing the vista of True North
and a clear horizon beyond.

The smell of pinesap and vanilla
from ponderosa bark baked in sun
envelope her.
Ponderosas,
whose bark resists fire,
who beyond hope
last centuries of creeping moss, woodpeckers,
lightning fires;
housing owls, racing squirrels,
burrowing beetles.

The tension of the drive eases,
as she now befriends the vista,
how far she's come,
why she is on this journey.

Picking up a pinecone at her feet,
placing it on the dash board,
she pulls out again onto the highway,
a little slower,
clearer about the destination,
where she has already arrived.

How well we understand about the relentless journey and our own tunnel vision; about missed opportunities, and vista points, if only we let ourselves **stop** and see what is right there and what's on the periphery, so obvious, yet so often obscured from our view. But we know about life. We get on auto-pilot, we carve our path and we don't take the time to stop and lift our eyes to look at the big picture, to get a wiser perspective. And to be honest- it is so much easier to be busy than to stop. It takes courage to be quiet and hear the truths that our inner voice wants to articulate. Because once we hear our soul speak, then we must learn how to respond to it. To ask ourselves: what do I need— not for external comfort but for inner wholeness? Opening vistas for our souls means exploring words spoken, deeds done, desires denied, relationships ignored or hurt. To ask: am I focusing on what is really important, am I using my gifts to right purpose? And to question: What real significance am I giving my life? There is something about physical vistas – those awesome views in nature, that ironically invite us to gaze inward. They challenge us to listen for the quiet voice of our own soul, and to quiet the inner chatter that inevitable fills our airwaves.

The High Holy Days are our turnout. Every poetic word or image we read in the machzor is designed to lead us to the vista. Our texts tell us- Esai Einai- lift your eyes, open your eyes, turn aside from your path, so that you can see what you need to see. Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a different choice rather than sacrificing Isaac. Hagar's eyes are opened by God and she sees the well that will sustain herself and her son. Only when Moses turns aside from his path does he see God's Presence in a burning bush. It's only from a place of vision that we can make choices about how we lead our lives. But we must create the time and the place for insight and vision to happen.

Sometimes the passage of time opens a vista for us, that we may not have been able to see earlier in our lives. My dear friend Debbie told me about her nephew's Bar Mitzvah last year. Present that day in the sanctuary was her father as well as her estranged uncle, her mother's brother. The two had not spoken in 40 years, since her parents had divorced. As her father followed the Torah and his grandson around the sanctuary, he passed by his former brother-in-law, seated at the end of an aisle. The uncle extended his hand, the father took it, and eyes met. Later that day, the uncle said, "I thought I was supposed to hold this

anger against you on behalf of my father, because you had hurt my sister.” The passage of time and this *l’dor v’dor* moment had opened a vista for him; he had spent half his life angry at a man who had been his friend, because a marriage had not worked out. Time and now opportunity had given him the chance to step off the path of upholding his family honor, to see its real cost, and put down the burden of this old anger. He had allowed t’shuvah and healing to enter. That is what opening ourselves to a vista can do.

Sometimes unexpected loss opens vistas for us. The *buena vista* of our Ventura hillsides was taken from us almost two years ago by a fire that brought so much damage and suffering. A view that once offered a peaceful beauty is a very different vista now, revealing a devastation of landscape and personal dreams. Those whose homes were affected were forced to confront profound loss. The Thomas fire forced those who suffered loss to turn inward, look to the contours of their own strength to find self-reliance. The work of rebuilding a home had to begin with rebuilding an inner resilience, to reimagine one’s life, home, and future.

And there is no doubt that when we are faced with illness, we are literally forced off the road to contemplate another vista. My friend

Vicky says, “after my diagnosis, I had to think deeply about how important my work was to me, and how I could keep practicing my profession but not drain all my strength and have my work be the only thing I did with my life. I started to take painting classes, which brought me joy, and renewed my spirit.” How many of us have found our auto pilot snapped off suddenly, with a wake-up call from a conversation in a doctor’s office? We lift our eyes to the scope of our lives quite differently, then. For my friend Vicky, this vista allowed a reflection on her life that was about more than health, but about work, and purpose and joy.

And there are moments, too, when we must admit, we must stick to the road, understanding that vision and insight are not available to us. Driving through Yosemite last summer, in the midst of fires across Northern California. I drove past many turnouts, knowing their views were obliterated by smoke. Sometimes, the conditions in our life are not right for there to be that external vision that leads to insight. Sometimes we need to keep on the path, apply the gas, until the haze passes. Yet often there is a chance to glimpse the horizon if we seek those places of

vision within our self, and enter them with an open mind and heart and a willingness to be changed by what we see.

Our biblical Moses may not be who we think of with the metaphor of driving a car along a mountain road, but if there is anyone who knows about stopping at vistas, it is Moses, whom God takes to a mountaintop to reveal the promised land below. Moses can see the big picture for the Israelites, their journey ahead into nationhood. But Moses is also given a different diagnosis at the end of his life. He will not go into the land, he will not continue to lead the people. Yet Moses stands at this last vista point, not to focus on the disappointment that his life goal will not be realized, or to harbor bitterness toward God, or others, but to re-define what his contribution to others will be. Moses will no longer be the one who stands before the people, he will be the one who sits among the people, teaching them their history and God's commandments. The entire Book of Deuteronomy *is* the account of Moses teaching the Israelites before they go into the land. And this is the legacy Moses carries with our people to this day- not Moshe HaNavi- Moses the Prophet, but as Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our teacher. Torah says Moses

eyes never dim; looking with clear vision, Moses chooses what his next stage of life will be and finds renewed purpose.

What I know Moses can teach us is how to live among life's chaos and still keep one's heart open to the vista. I admit the chaos of daily life can so often keep me from seeing horizons, panoramas, the geography of my life. There are certainly moments when it is thrust upon me- life cycle moments, death, loss, and transition, when the "holy stripping away of the familiar" opens me up to vista points. But the HHD reminds us that we cannot just let external circumstances force us to view our interior life - we are to create these openings ourselves. Psychologist Allen Wheelis writes, "If we believe our destiny is shaped by external forces- by what others say or do to us-- then we are victims of life, but if we believe that our lives are shaped from within, then we are creators, and have an inner freedom." I want to be the creator of my inner life, not have it created for me in reaction to life's happenstance. As it is so often said, we don't always get to choose what happens, but we do get to choose how we will respond.

And choice is the heart of the Holy Days- the choices we make toward t'shuvah, turning back to our right paths, repairing what is

frayed. Every breath we take is a t'shuvah, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev taught, of God returning our breath to us, and letting us turn in a new direction, make new choices; as if we are created anew with each and every breath. Choose life, choose good, choose blessing- this is what our High Holy Day liturgy implores, breath after breath. I can see that panorama that brings me equanimity. Like the peaceful calm that comes when we gaze at the ocean, able to feel that inner calm in spite of the turbulence of the water and the crash of the waves, that is what is promised- coming to our own sense of peace. Mussar teacher Alan Morinis describes equanimity as “an inner balance that coexists with a world which accepts turbulence and even turmoil, because that’s just the way life is.”

Let us use this vista moment wisely, to survey our lives, our deeds, listen to the voice of our souls. When these Days of Awe end, let us turn back onto our paths a little more deliberately, with a little more awareness and a little more insight. L'shana tova, may it be a year of blessing.

Amen. ###