

It's All in the Way You Look at Things

Rabbi Sam Pollak

Sometimes, the best lessons in life come from children's books.

Last May, I read for the first time *The Phantom Tollbooth*,¹ the 1961 classic of children's literature by Norton Juster. The book tells the story of Milo, a young boy who finds everything in life completely uninteresting. One day he comes home from school to find a mysterious package waiting for him in his bedroom. It contains a strange tollbooth, which transports him to a fantastical land. There, a road sign tells him he has arrived in Expectations. Once he drives beyond Expectations, he skirts the foothills of confusion, visits the island of Conclusions (you get there by jumping), and traverses the Mountains of Ignorance. And at various points in his journey, he meets figures who show him that life is anything but dull.

My favorite encounter is between Milo and a strange boy named Alec Bings. They meet after Milo, traveling along the Scenic Route, stops at a spot called the Point of View. Here is the scene:

"Isn't it beautiful?" gasped Milo.

"Oh, I don't know," answered a strange voice.

"It's all in the way you look at things."

"I beg your pardon?" said Milo, for he didn't see who had spoken.

"I said it's all about how you look at things," repeated the voice.

Milo turned around and found himself staring at two very neatly polished brown shoes, for standing directly in front of him (if you can use the word 'standing' for anyone suspended in mid-air) was another boy just about his age, whose feet were easily three feet off the ground.

..."How do you manage to stand up there?" asked Milo, for this was the subject that most interested him.

¹ Juster, Norton. *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Random House, 1961.

“I was about to ask you the same question,” answered the boy, “for you must be much older than you look to be standing on the ground.”

“What do you mean?” Milo asked.

“Well,” said the boy, “in my family everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it’s going to be when he’s an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground. When we’re fully grown up or, as you can see, grown down, our feet finally touch. Of course, there are a few of us whose feet never reach the ground no matter how old we get, but I suppose it’s the same in every family.”

... “You certainly must be very old to have reached the ground already.”

“Oh no,” said Milo seriously. “In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know how far until we actually get there.”

“What a silly system.” The boy laughed. “Then your head keeps changing its height and you always see things in a different way? Why, when you’re fifteen things won’t look at all the way they did when you were ten, and at twenty everything will change again.”

“I suppose so,” replied Milo, for he had never really thought about the matter.

“We always see things from the same angle,” the boy continued. “It’s much less trouble that way...” (102–106)

If only we were part of Alec Bings’ family, always seeing things the same way—wouldn’t that be easier? We all have different beliefs and ideas, some of which are quite stable, some of which we think are integral to our identities. But the truth is that we are like Milo. Though we might stop getting taller at some point, we never really stop growing up. We are constantly looking at things in new ways.

Every time we reach Rosh HaShanah, we arrive with another year's worth of experiences, another chapter written in the books of our lives. For me, a lot has changed since last Rosh HaShanah: ordination as a rabbi, moving to a new state, starting a new job in a new community, marriage to my husband, and the loss of my grandmother. Others of us have graduated high school, experienced illness, welcomed children, seen the end of a relationship, learned a new skill...not to mention all the changes that have happened in our country and in our world.

How do we make sense of it all, when so much changes every year?

Our prayerbooks say, *Hayom harat olam*. Today is the day of the world's birth, when we retell the story of creation and everything is completely new. But that idea seems to be in tension with the second half of the sentence: *hayom yaamid bamishpat kol yitzurei olamim*, today is the day we submit for judgment. If our lives are brand new today, on what basis can we be judged?

Obviously, we do not lose everything that happened last year and in the years before just because Rosh HaShanah has arrived. We are not new in the sense that our lives start from zero today. Rather, Rosh HaShanah calls us to embrace a fresh sense of curiosity, a sense of discovery about our stories.

This day of creation calls us to examine our own lives *as if* encountering them for the first time.

This is not an easy task, but fortunately there are guides all around us. There are members of our community already who are accustomed to seeing the world with new eyes, hearing with new ears, touching with new hands. They are masters at appreciating the nuances of their experiences, they are open spiritual seekers, and they are diligent scientists, always testing things to see what they can learn from them.

I am talking, of course, about our children.

Just last Sunday, I watched one of the youngest members of our community running around the synagogue grounds gathering dandelion flowers. As she picked them from the grass, she assembled them, one by one, in a growing bouquet. I leaned down to say hello, but she ignored me. The dandelions were far more interesting: the purest yellow, the bright contrast with the deep green grass, the fluffiness of the bunch gathered by our little botanist.

There was so much to appreciate there, but I would have dismissed the weeds had I not been led there by the curiosity of a child.

Columnist Courtney Martin, who contributes to one of my favorite podcasts, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, reflects that, through the eyes of her 16-month old daughter, “the mundane becomes miraculous:”

Keys go in mailboxes and miniature doors open to reveal pieces of paper inside, left there by a friendly person in a funny outfit? Fascinating! Dominoes can be sorted into various sizes of beautifully colored baskets in whichever way I want? Sign me up! Lotion is a white substance that comes out of a metal tube and you can rub it on someone’s hand and it disappears and they feel soft? Holy moly!²

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught³ that the greatest hindrance to our experience of the divine in our lives is our “adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés” (46). When we get too used to things, they lose their luster, and we don’t notice the magic around us all the time.

Children have not yet developed these barriers; they treat everything as a miracle. On this day of the world’s birth, children can be our teachers.

As we grow older, we often adjust to our lives the same way we adjust to our world. We get bored or feel stuck in our routines, we take privileges for granted. Stress gets in the way of experiencing joy. We all have days like this.

My husband and I have a little spiritual exercise we like to do whenever we are having one of those days. One of says to the other, “Tell me three good things.” And then we have to come up with three things we are grateful for that day. And we feel a little better. The challenges don’t go away, but the change in perspective allows us to appreciate the blessings in our lives too.

Fresh eyes, fresh questions—they open us to the miracles in our lives.

Just as new a perspective reveals our blessings, so can it reveal our faults and misdeeds. And that is, after all, the primary charge of the Days of Awe: to perform *t’shuvah*, recounting of and repentance for the times we’ve missed the mark.

² Martin, Courtney E. “Reuniting with Awe.” *On Being*, Krista Tippett Public Productions, 6 Mar. 2015, onbeing.org/blog/reuniting-with-awe/.

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. Meridian Books, 1959.

A few summers ago, I had to confront parts of myself that I preferred to avoid. I was completing the chaplaincy training required for becoming a rabbi, which included both visits with patients in the hospital and processing time with other members of my cohort. Its goals included improving our communication skills, developing awareness of our inner selves, and learning to give and receive productive feedback. The feedback I received gave me a new perspective on my life.

I have always been a quiet person. As a kid I was called shy, and as an adult I call myself an introvert. After an hour or two of social interaction, I need some alone time to recharge my batteries. I am also an observer and an analyzer. I watch and draw my own ideas, building arguments in my head before sharing my conclusions. In school environments, this pattern of behavior helped me achieve, and the validation reinforced my disposition. But I learned during that summer of chaplaincy training that it has other consequences.

My peers told me I made them feel small in the classroom. They shared that they saw me as uninterested in their thoughts. Most of all, they said they felt judged by me.

I had no idea that I was being experienced this way. I didn't realize that my quiet attitude in our classes left my classmates wondering what I was thinking. In reality, I *was* listening intently to their ideas, but I was also silently evaluating their ideas in my head before stating my own. Though I was hearing them, I was not helping them feel heard. Instead, I was helping them feel judged.

In exchange for academic validation, I had unwittingly damaged my relationships.

The irony is that those relationships were what enabled me to do *t'shuvah*. With their feedback, my peers enabled me to see myself through their eyes. They helped me prioritize not just the sharing of ideas, but the care for the people doing the sharing.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, taught⁴ that “for [us] to choose between two possible paths...[we] must stand over and above them, outside of them...[How] can anyone decide to choose the path of holiness,” he asks, “while [their] spirit is being pulled downward by base instincts, or while [their] mind is still afflicted by the evil inclination, which causes [them] to confuse evil with good and good with evil?” (*A Student's Obligation* pp. 66–67).

⁴ Shapira, Kalonymus Kalman. “The Importance of Spiritual and Character Growth.” *A Student's Obligation*, pp. 62–67.

Without a new perspective, we might not realize when we are hurting others or ourselves. We might see only one path, going in the same direction, led by the evil inclination, where we continue doing the thing that caused harm. But the compassionate feedback of a friend, a relative, or a colleague can help us rise above our situation and discover another path before us: the path to holiness and *t'shuvah*.

And then there are times when, without regard to our efforts or expectations, we find ourselves in places we never thought we be. Life brings changes outside our control. We thought we'd live a long time, but we get sick. Our loved ones pass away. We contend with mental illness, with addiction. We never imagined we'd need to find refuge in a shelter. We are astounded to find out our beloved no longer feels the same way about us, or maybe they never did.

This year, there are Jews who won't be gathering in their spiritual homes for the Days of Awe. Or maybe they will be in the building, but it won't feel like home, as they are displaced by hurricane winds and rains that tore down buildings and raised up waters.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist and survivor of Auschwitz, taught that at times like these, “[when] we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves” (p. 112). The way we respond to unavoidable suffering can be a source a meaning in our lives. The choice we have in these circumstances—the *t'shuvah* we are able to do—is choosing the way we perceive our stories.

A Jewish community is not defined by its building or where it gathers to pray, but by the individuals and families it comprises. We are not defined by illness, by loss of work, or by relationship's collapse. We determine how we want to be defined, and as we navigate circumstances beyond our control, we learn new definitions of ourselves along the way.

When the winds blow, they may indeed blow us off course. And though we'd rather they not come in the first place, once they do, we can discover new meaning in life. Life itself offers us a new perspective.

In The Phantom Tollbooth, *Milo eventually* tries to see things from an adult perspective himself, just like Alec Bings. When he does, he concentrates really hard and starts to float up into the air, so his head is at the same level as Alec's. But then Milo looks around, loses focus, and plops back on the ground.

The Days of Awe are for us what that moment is for Milo. They are the ultimate break in the routine of our years. We pause and focus. We imagine what it would be like to see ourselves from the ultimate, objective, outside perspective—God's. But then we will stop, we will touch back down on the ground and go on with our lives. And that is how it should be; we can't live with our heads in the clouds all the time.

But for just ten days, one day, an hour, a moment, let us put down the pen with which we write our stories. Let us resist the urge to force our lives until they come out just the way we want. Let us instead pause, question, and listen to what our lives are telling us.

Hayom harat olam. Today is the day of the world's birth. Today is the day our lives are born anew. May we greet the year with renewed senses of gratitude, of growth, and of purpose.

And may we then pick up the pen, and write the next chapter of our stories for good.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu.