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Ellul 5779, early September 2019

Dear members and friends of the Pardes Hannah community,

Warm greetings! I hope this finds you and your loved ones well. At Pardes Hannah, it is our *minhag*, our custom, to begin each year by meditating on some over-arching theme that might enrich our own spiritual practice, some prompt that might accompany us through our late summers and early falls, the month of Ellul and the Days of Awe. Over the course of the High Holidays, members are invited to share a *vort*, a brief insight or teaching in response to the theme—something drawn from their lives, from their insights and yearning, their puzzlement and gratitude, their holy chutzpah, from their cellular Knowing and their deeper Not-Knowing!

This year's High Holiday theme (drum roll) is “**Being Present: Lih'yot Nokhah** / **להיות נוכח**,” which I like to think of as the ability to say, *Hineni*, here am I—not hiding!¹ Let me try to unpack a few of its meanings, in the hopes that it may spark your own realizations and insights. I'd love to hear what arises in you.

(1) **Awakening.** Being present is that moment when **we see or hear more clearly or vividly, when we see with new eyes.** It may be a sudden flash or a slow dawning of insight, recalling Jacob's cry of amazement and awe upon waking from his dream, “YHWH, the One who-Is-Was Will-Be, is in the place and I, I did not know...” (Gen. 28:16) This waking may occur suddenly, unprompted. But it may also be cultivated as a part of a daily practice, of removing the metaphorical “slumber” or “film” from our eyes—in the words of the morning prayer, *ha-ma'avir sheinah me-einai u-tenumah me-afapai*: “Blessed is the One...who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.”

(2) Another sense of being present, *nokhah*, is when we respond to the existential question, the first question posed in the Torah, “**Ayeka,**” **Where are you?** It is the ability to acknowledge where we stand **right now**, not where we were yesterday, or where we aspire to be. It is the clear-eyed ability to call out *mi-sham*, “from *there*,” *mi-makom she-hu sham*², **from the place where we truly stand. Hineni, here am I, not hiding.**

(3) Another layer of being present is to “say” *Lefanekha* / **לפניך**: to be aware of what and who is right “**before you.**” This stance is **profoundly relational**, as when one is present with another person or being, *panim el panim*, Face to Face, I and Thou. It begins with a moment of **turning to another**, an act that may precede any exchange of words, as the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has taught. Nor is this relating limited to the interpersonal realm; it includes stopping and deeply noting/acknowledging works of culture and the natural world—the tomato plant, the insect, calico cat or sparrow, or the wind rustling through sunlit maple leaves in early autumn. It arises from paying attention, stopping the ineluctable *rush forward* to slowly behold what is at hand. This encounter is only deepened as our lips open in prayer or silent blessing, a hushed “thank you,” *modeh ani*.

1. I first heard this formulation from my meditation teacher, Sylvia Boorstein.

2. From the hasidic master Moshe Hayyim Efra'im of Sedelikow, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, in his *Degel Mahaneh Efraim, parashat Va-yetze, be-zeh ha-lashon*.

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This ability to respond, to note the preciousness of being, brings with it response-ability: the opportunity to become more aware of how we flow into/intersect with the world, our speech patterns, our commitments and deferrals, our use of time. Our footprint on this earth.

(4) Finally, Being Present broaches the key question, **being present to what or to whom?** Being present-to is a kind of **Bearing Witness**, as we discern: What is *dohaq ha-sha'ah*, the need of the hour? This entails letting go of certain preconceptions in order to be newly present to hidden cries and new developments. To name perhaps the great collective issue of our day, “**What is the cry of the earth?**” Only a deep listening, and a deep being **present** can (perhaps paradoxically) ensure our collective **future**. Out of this listening, action emerges, one rooted in that listening.

Finally, on all these levels, we may wish to ask: (1) How have moments of “being present” affected our lives, and more specifically, colored the past year? What **stories/instances** of “being present” do we wish to bring to these Days of Awe, insights born of heightened awareness? (2) What are key **practices** for regularly cultivating “being present,” for removing the film from our eyes? And (3) What are the **action directives** that emerge from the first two? How do we use these moment of “being present” for good and not for harm, for *tikkun ha-lev ve-tikkun ha-olam*, for healing hearts and healing the world.

Shanah tovah umetukah, may this be a good and sweet year, a year of health and deep connection, in which we find new ways to inscribe the word “**Le-Chayyim-To Life!**” in this, our precious world.

Be-ahavah rabbah/much love,
Reb Elliot

P.S. Almost forgot! The Hebrew name for this new year 5780 is תש”ף: **TaSHaF**. These three letters make up the root, שתף, SHaTaF, which variously means: **to participate, to share, to partner, to co-create**. May we find skillful ways to share the work this year, to share sacred moments, insights, burdens and joy. May we be all become, in the words of the Sages³, שותפות/שותפים לקב”ה במעשה בראשת, partners and co-creators with the Holy One in the work of sustaining and renewing our World. AMEN!

3. talmud bavli Shabbat 119b et al.