

# **Living in the *she'ela*: How getting curious helps us see the divine in others**

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As many of you know, I biked across the country last summer.

I traveled with Angie, one of my favorite people and my long-time cycling partner.

We're both about 5'2", not too big not too small.

I have shortish curlyish brownish hair and dimples, Angie's got blond hair and hazel eyes.

We rode,

just the two of us,

all the way from Anacortes Washington to Boston Massachusetts.

As we traversed the country, we were told over and over again:

be safe.

Be careful.

Some were concerned about our proximity to speedy cars, others were more pointed:

"Two young women alone on the road - just, be on the lookout, okay?"

The concern for our safety as women became alarmingly more pronounced on the outskirts of Native American reservations.

As we prepared to bike through the Blackfeet Reservation outside of Glacier National Park, we were warned it would be best to move through as quickly as possible.

When we stopped to refill our water bottles on the outskirts of Fort Peck Reservation, a man told us not to stay anywhere on the reservation.

He advised us to bike clear through the reservation before settling down for the night.

"Those people," he warned us, "are dangerous."

For a moment, Angie and I were concerned.

Biking clear through was going to be impossible. It was 100 miles across and halfway through the day, we were only 30 miles into our ride.

Out of necessity, we chose to ride into Fort Peck and we set up camp in the middle of the reservation, in a town called Wolf Point.

Even with the dire warnings, we decided to explore.

In the end, we found nothing to fear.

The lifeguards at the swimming pool let us use the pool showers and set up our tent in the park.

The owner of a local microbrewery chatted with us for over an hour.

During our time on the reservations,  
we two single women on bikes  
experienced nothing but kindness and generosity.

I will never know the specific concerns of the man who warned us against spending time in the reservation.  
Our conversation was brief and to the point. But he left me with a distinct reminder of just how easily we make  
assumptions and judgments about others,  
and just how important it is to approach the world with fresh eyes.

We live in world of story fragments.

Every day we interact with people we simply cannot spend quality time with:  
grocery store cashiers, bank tellers, the folks in cars next to us on the way to work.  
Often, we get only the briefest glimpse of their stories:  
a personalized license plate, a bumper sticker, their hairdo,  
the tone of their voice during the 20 seconds in which we interact.

And in those twenty seconds, we write people's stories for them.  
We read the bumper sticker and invent a narrative about the person driving the car.  
We hear a person's tone of voice as dismissive, or lackluster, or tired, and we create the backdrop for the person's  
discontent.

Making quick judgments is not inherently bad -  
split-second decisions can be lifesaving.

In *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell relates a story about firefighters responding to a  
house fire.

Even after breaking through the door and drenching the first floor with water,  
the fire continued to burn.

Sensing that something wasn't right, the lieutenant ordered everyone to vacate the house as quickly as possible.

Moments after they exited, the house collapsed.

The lieutenant's quick thinking saved the lives of his entire crew.

That sense of something being "off" comes from somewhere - our actions and reactions stem from our own lived  
experiences and from training we have received.

The fire lieutenant made a life-saving decision based not only on his gut feeling  
but also on the training he received as a firefighter  
and his understanding of the structural fragility of a building on fire.

We each make a hundred potentially life-saving judgments every day.

We look both ways before crossing the street, even when the sign says "walk."  
We choose the more well lit running path at night.  
We throw away the three-day leftovers, even though they "look fine."

We make educated guesses, based on what we have learned about drivers and dark alleys and mold and what we have experienced on previous street-crossings and runs.

The key difference between making an educated guess and a dangerous assumption lies in the authority we give to those assumptions.

Mark Twain wrote: "It's not what we know that gets us in trouble, it's what we know 'for sure.'"

In other words, our experiences surely shape us and teach us, as does our training,  
but we rarely have all of the information there is to know.  
And the balance between assessing danger and assuming danger is precarious.

Less than two weeks ago, Keith Lamont Scott was shot and killed.  
Within minutes, story fragments were flying.  
He was carrying a gun, he wasn't carrying a gun.  
He had a legal permit to carry a weapon, he didn't.  
He was reading a book, there was no book.  
He had taken medication,  
He had smoked marijuana.  
The nationally reoccurring one-liner, "black man shot and killed by policeman,"  
hardly touched on the complexity of the situation..

Peaceful protests deteriorated into riots on Tuesday evening.  
On the next night, I joined the Charlotte Clergy Coalition for Justice on the streets of uptown Charlotte.  
We sought to be a peaceful presence and to bear witness in a city full of tension and pain and anger.

I found myself at the corner of Trade and College,  
standing in a line holding hands with Rev. Robin Tanner  
and another clergyperson whose name I still do not know.  
We stood between protesters and police clad in riot gear.  
We stood within whirlwinds of assumptions.

As all of you know from your own experience of Wednesday night, things took a turn for the worse.

I cannot tell you who did what to whom. Especially in times of chaos, we see things differently based on where we are standing. Everything happened too quickly.

As clergy, we wished to encourage people toward righteous anger and public lament through non-violent protest.  
Our first amendment gives every citizen the right to assemble and permits freedom of speech.  
When I arrived at the protest, I was expecting a peaceful gathering.  
By the time I left, my tallit had protected my face from tear gas.

Tension.

Assumptions.

Opinions.

Rage.

Violence.

How did we get to this point?

The High Holy Days provide us with a perfect time to slow down and reflect upon the ways in which we make assumptions about the world.

The cry of the shofar breaks open our soul  
calls on us to take a hard look at ourselves.

What assumptions do we make?

Are we judging fairly?

Our sages taught "*dan l'kaf zechut* - judge on the side of merit." Or, as it is often translated, give the benefit of the doubt.

But giving the benefit of the doubt can be hard. In fact, with some actions, we actually cannot assume good intent.

Tonight, I offer you a second step, a step offered to me by my mentor and teacher Rabbi Stephanie Kolin. Often, she told me, our task is to get curious.

To get curious, we must accept that there may be NO intent.

To get curious, we must be willing to listen from a true desire to better understand each other.

To get curious, we must genuinely be interested in learning more about the lived experiences of others, experiences that might challenge or contradict what we have experienced.

Rabbinic tradition is deeply rooted in the *sheelah*, the act of asking questions.

Our Talmud, all 37 volumes of it, is made up entirely of *sheelot u'tshuvot*, questions and answers.

It is the way the rabbis built Judaism as we know it - by asking questions of our received tradition, answering those questions, and then questioning those answers.

Try thinking like a five-year-old.

"Daddy, why are wheels round?"

"Mommy, why does the ocean have waves?"

Five-year-olds are still capable of expressing wonder when they see something for the first time.

As the years go by, that sense of novelty gives way.

We begin to fold bits and pieces of our past experiences into each encounter.

Which is all fine and good until we stop asking questions and begin to rely only on our assumptions.

Getting curious means seeking more information, wondering out loud, always searching for additional perspectives.

Getting curious means living in the *sheelah*, living in the question mark.

Questions that stem from curiosity invite answerers to share stories. They are open-ended, they ask

Why?, and

How?

Questions asked from a genuine place of wonder give people space to explain themselves:

What happened?

What did you see?

How are you feeling?

Each of us has experienced these last two weeks differently,

whether through social media,

written news,

broadcast accounts,

or varying first-hand experiences.

Asking questions from a place of open curiosity invites people to share their experiences.

And when we offer people space to speak their story, we give each other the opportunity to heal and become more whole together.

I want to know -

What helps you feel at home?

When was the last time you cried?

What are you thankful for?

Where do you find joy?

For whom are you responsible?

We can disagree all day about facts and opinions, but it is in hearing the experiences behind those opinions, the moments in time that lead us to those opinions, that we find the humanity in each other.

When we stick to our version of the story, we risk viewing people around us as cardboard cutouts, two-dimensional versions of themselves.

We write their stories for them.

But when we live in the *sheela* and ask questions that stem from a true curiosity and interest in learning people's lived experiences,  
when we share  
moments that have shaped us into who we are today,  
we are able to see the ways in which we are all creatures of the divine,  
none more important or less important than the other,  
and all responsible for each other.

When we embrace each other for the truths of our lives,  
we become a sacred community,  
a community that recognizes and sees the holiness in each human being.

Rabbi Akiba once asked his students:

"How do you know when morning has come and it is time to recite the morning shema?" One student said: "When you look into the distance and you can tell the difference between a cow and a donkey."

"No, that's not it," said the rabbi.

Another student asked, "Is it when you can tell the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree?"

"No, that's not correct either," said the rabbi.

And then he taught: "You will know morning has come when you can look into the face of a fellow person and recognize the godliness in that person."

The story of Rabbi Akiba is a story of *dan l'chaf zechut*. It teaches us to acknowledge each person as a Godly person, to give the benefit of the doubt.

We learn this lesson through a *sheelah*, an open question.

These High Holy Day call on us not only to *dan l'chaf zechut* but also to live in the *sheelah*, to get curious and ask questions.

And so tonight I offer us a prayer for new beginnings.

Please join me as we pray responsively:

Me: On this Erev Rosh Hashana,

*Kahal: May we make ourselves open to new perspectives and new stories*

Me: May we listen to the lived experiences of our fellow human beings and the ways those lived experiences intersect with our own

*Kahal: May we seek out narratives, rather than opinions and beliefs.*

Me: And may we live by the words of our Torah, which teaches: *kedoshim tehiyu* - be holy, for God our God; the one who created us and imbued us with holiness, is holy.