

“SEEING OURSELVES”

According to Jewish law one is not permitted to pray in front of a mirror. As a result interiors of synagogues have many kinds of decorations, but no mirrors.

The first reason that one should not pray before a mirror is the chance of mistaking the object of reverence -- it should be God, not oneself. But there is another, subtler reason.

Prayer goes ill with self-consciousness. As long as we are concerned about how we look, it becomes very difficult to be in the spiritual moment. Similarly, in a house of mourning we cover the mirrors because even a mourner can be easily distracted by seeing his or her own image in the mirror, and look to straighten a tie, adjust a hem, or simply “pull oneself together.” Self-consciousness destroys the self-forgetting required for immersion in a spiritual moment.

Every now and then in a wedding I have asked for the video cameras to be turned off and the flashes to be stilled. The bride and groom close their eyes, knowing that no ‘all seeing lens’ is recording their faces. They revel in the sanctity of the moment. In joy, in grief and in prayer, it is easier to see ourselves if we are not watching.