

Learning How To See

I remember the exchange quite clearly. I was sitting by the bedside of a congregant that I did not know very well. The family had called to ask me if I wouldn't mind stopping by the nursing home for a visit. As I walked into the room, I pulled up a chair next to the bed in which he was laying and began a conversation: "How are you feeling today?" I asked.

He looked at me with sad eyes. His response was simple and profound: "Invisible." he replied.

Invisible, forgotten, neglected, and scared— we sat together for a while as I listened to his story and tried to offer him comfort. And when I left I remember thinking to myself. "I didn't even know him before today and I only had the privilege of visiting because I was asked. I considered how many others in our community feel invisible as well."

The parsha that we read from on Rosh Hashanah is wonderfully rich and multi layered. Abraham's greeting of the angels, the news that Sarah will give birth to Isaac, the story of Sodom and Gemora, the binding of Isaac, and the banishment of Hagar fills the narrative with stories of faith, hope, and suffering. But the theme that runs throughout the Torah texts that we

will read from over the next two days is that of "seeing." As our Etz Hayim commentary points out:

One incident after another involves people seeing or not seeing God. Hagar's eyes are opened to see the miraculous well that God has provided for her...Abraham sees God atop Mount Moriah while the servants who were travelling with him do not. One of the gifts with which spiritually sensitive people are blessed is the ability to see God in their daily experiences (Etz Hayim Humash, 99).

Vayera continually reminds us that in order to discover God, we first have to learn how to see.

Let's look at Hagar. After a jealous Sarah tells Abraham to throw Hagar out of the house, we find her wandering in the desert where she leaves her son Ishmael to die once she can no longer provide him with water. As Hagar is walking away in order to avoid witnessing this terrible tragedy, the Torah tells us that God calls out to her and says:

What troubles you Hagar? Fear not for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him. *Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.* She went and filled the skin with water and let the boy drink. (21:17-19)

Notice that the Torah does not say that God magically created a well of water for Hagar and Ishmael, but merely that *God opened her eyes* to the well that was already in front of her. In other words, God helped change Hagar's life by teaching her how to see.

And what happens just before Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac?
An angel stops Abraham just in time, he looks up and sees a ram caught in the thicket.

In both narratives, the message is clear: God wants us to learn how to see clearly. God wants us to learn how to make visible, that which has been previously invisible to us.

There is a well known experiment that I just encountered a few weeks ago. It is called the "Selection Awareness test" and was created by Psychology professors Daniel Simmons and Christopher Chabris as a simple experiment for students in a psychology course at Harvard University. It has since become an extremely well known experiment that has been administered in psychology classes, shown at museums, and featured in Newsweek, The New Yorker, and on Dateline NBC. For those who have not seen this, you really have to google it after Rosh Hashanah, and I am sorry, but I am going to ruin the punch line. You are presented with a video of six people passing a basketball around. Three of the people are dressed in black jerseys and three are dressed in white ones. You are asked to follow the players dressed in white as they pass the ball to one another and keep count of the number of passes that occur. I came close- 13 out of 15. I was feeling pretty good about my answer. And then, the person administering the test asked the following question: But, did you see the gorilla?! Gorilla, I thought to myself!

What are you talking about? And then I played it again- and there it was. A person dressed as a gorilla walking right through the people passing the ball. How could I have missed it? *Why didn't I see what was right in front of me?*

But we often don't see what is right in front of us. Let's take another example from a number of years ago. Some of you may have heard the story about the Virtuoso violinist, Joshua Bell, who was asked by Washington Post writer Gene Weingarten to run a social experiment by playing his violin in a Washington D.C. subway station during rush hour in January of 2007. Bell had played at Carnegie hall, received numerous awards for his talents, and even been on Sesame Street! And yet, here is what happened on that January morning when Bell descended into the Metro dressed in Jeans and a long sleeve T shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball hat.

Bell went into the station and began to play. He played numerous classical pieces and watched as thousands of people went through the station on their way to work. Most people, with the exception of a few small children, were in too much of a hurry to stop and listen. According to the original piece written about this experiment:

Three days before he appeared at the Metro station, Bell had filled the house at Boston's stately Symphony Hall, where merely pretty good seats went for \$100. Two weeks later, at the Music Center at Strathmore, in North Bethesda, he would play to a standing-room-only audience so respectful of his artistry that they stifled their coughs until the silence between movements.

But when he was down in the Metro, things were different:

In the three-quarters of an hour that Joshua Bell played, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the performance, at least for a minute. Twenty-seven gave money, most of them on the run -- for a total of \$32 and change. That leaves the 1,070 people who hurried by, oblivious, many only three feet away, few even turning to look....

There was no ethnic or demographic pattern to distinguish the people who stayed to watch Bell, or the ones who gave money, from that vast majority who hurried on past, unheeding. Whites, blacks and Asians, young and old, men and women, were represented in all three groups. But the behavior of one demographic remained absolutely consistent. Every single time a child walked past, he or she tried to stop and watch. And every single time, a parent scooted the kid away.

British author John Lane writes about the loss of the appreciation for beauty in the modern world commented: ..."This is about having the wrong priorities," Lane said. ...If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that -- then what else are we missing? (Washington Post, Pearls Before Breakfast, Gene Weingarten)

What else are we missing? That is the question. **What do we fail to see?**

Let's remember that the Bell experiment happened in 2007, before the explosion of smart phones. I dare say that things have gotten much worse. We all walk around looking at our smart phones, texting, surfing the web- but whether we are in motion or we are standing still, we often miss what is right in front of us, and we rarely stop to notice the beauty in our world. It seems that there is so much in our life that is invisible to us.

But it does not have to be that way. God is not the only one who can open our eyes. We, who are made in God's image can open our eyes as well. The Talmud teaches that part of our role in life is to imitate God. In tractate Sotah we learn that just as God clothes the naked, so should we cloth the naked. Just as God comforts the mourner, so should we comfort the mourner (Sotah 14a). And, going back to Abraham and Hagar, I would add that just as God sees and opens our eyes, so too should we.

I am pleased to say that this past year we, as a congregation, have begun to take active steps to see one another. In general, as our united community comes together we have come to realize that previous historical differences are not necessarily as strong as they were perceived to be. We have begun to see one another as members of one Jewish family working together to create a vibrant, dynamic, and meaningful kehillah kedosha, holy community on the Jersey Shore.

We have created a welcoming task force to make everyone who comes to any of our programs feel welcome. Our board, thanks to the work of Suzanne Michel and Sheryl Kaplan, reached out to every member of our congregation to call and check in with each of you just to see how you were

doing. If you did not get a call, please let me know after the holidays and I will work to connect you with a member of the board. We want you to know that we see you, and we would like to be there for you in any way that we can.

This year we also began to build upon our commitment to care for one another by working to create a chesed committee that will strive to help those in our community that might need a bit of assistance. From helping new parents, to assisting people who have lost a loved one, and eventually working to provide transportation to people who have trouble getting to and from the synagogue, there is much work to be done. But this year we have started that work together. If you are interested in helping with either our welcoming efforts or our chesed committee, please fill out the volunteer forms that will be handed out on Yom Kippur, or feel free to e-mail or call after the holidays and I will happily connect you.

Another critical committee that bears mentioning here is our Strategic planning committee, which has also been working hard to help us discover how we might meet the needs of our community. In many ways the goal of this committee is to help our staff, lay leaders, and members see our current situation, and one another, more clearly. As Gary mentioned earlier, please

take a few moments, either online or in hard copy, to fill out the brief survey in the coming weeks.

While we have made much progress in our efforts to begin seeing one another as a community, I am sure that we have a long way to go. I know that there are people we are missing. I am confident that there are those in our community who we are failing to see. Some of you sitting here right now, may feel invisible to our congregation. Synagogues are often good at seeing the usual suspects, the regulars who come to services, attend our sisterhood, Hazak, Mens club programs, or those who we know are experiencing an illness or a loss. But we often miss other people: The non-Jewish spouse, the single 20/30 something, home from college, in graduate school, or looking for work, the Gay couple, members suffering from mental illness or physical hardships, or members suffering from financial hardships that they are too ashamed to share with us. Synagogues, including our own, need to do a better job at seeing all of these people, but it should also be noted that we are often only as good as our information. We want to see you, to help you, to bring you into our community, but we may need you to help us see that you are there. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yose tells a story of a blind man who was once walking in the road with a torch in his hand. Rabbi Yosi asked him: Why are you carrying a torch when you can't see? The blind man replied: As long as I have this torch in my hand, people can see me

(Megillah 24b). We want to see you, we want to help, but we need you to carry your torch. We need you to help us open our eyes to your presence as we work to create a community *vision* that can truly help us see.

When Hagar first ran away from Sarai she had a vision in which an angel of God promised her that she would have a child, Yishmael. After this prophecy Hagar called God: *El Roi*, "The God who Sees Me". Rabbi Naomi Levy writes about the power and valuable lesson of that encounter.

God didn't do a thing for Hagar except to remind her of her own power. And that's why a lonely, lost slave gave God a new name: The God Who Sees Us as we are and reminds us of who we can be (Levy, Hope Will Find You, 125).

God sees us. God knows that we are valuable and God knows that we can see. The challenge for us is to remember who we can be. The challenge for us is to learn how to see one another, and our world, as creations of God and respond accordingly. We must learn how to see the person who feels invisible and open our eyes to the beauty of God's creation that has been in front of us all along. May this be the year that we teach our eyes how to see.