

Vision Beyond Sight

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 – 5772 (2011)
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A number of weeks ago, just a couple of hours after our two year old son, Hoshaya, fell asleep, one of our relatives went into his room to kiss him goodnight. Moments later, the relative rushed out of the room in a state of panic. “He’s not there. Your son, Hoshaya, he’s just not there.” I ran into Hoshaya’s room, also in a state of panic. His crib was empty. My heart pounded, fear flowed through my veins. Did we leave a window open? Was the backdoor left un-shut? It’s just too soon for our son to run away! And just then I closed my eyes, and after a quick second, with confidence, I kneeled on my knees, stuck my head under Hoshaya’s crib, and found my sweet son fast asleep.

As a father, as a spouse, as a member of this community, and as your rabbi – I am most terrified by those things that blur our vision. By the fears and the panic, the daily distractions and obligations, as well as the routines that so often prevent us from seeing past the apparent or immediate. In a world that calls so desperately for vision and clear sight, I am most scared of the things that distort our ability to see ourselves, our family and community, and ultimately prevent us from envisioning our future.

Today I would like us to focus on three approaches for gaining vision beyond sight. Each one is simple and precise.

First: we can learn to see more if we can learn to give more.

In describing Abraham’s three day journey to Mount Moriah, the place designated for the binding of Isaac, the Torah relates how “Abraham perceived the place from afar. And Abraham said to his young men, “stay here with the donkey.”” The rabbis were bothered by two details in this verse. First, why does the Torah only mention that Abraham saw the mountain from

afar? After all, Abraham was accompanied by his servants as well. Indeed, if the mountain for the binding was really there, then surely they would have seen it as well. Second, the rabbinic commentators were bothered by the trivial mention of the donkey. Why refer to the donkey at all? How does this insignificant detail, this donkey, further the central theme of the narrative of Isaac's binding?

In response, our esteemed rabbis offered the following midrash: "When Abraham saw Mount Moriah from afar, he said to Isaac, "Do you see what I see?" Isaac answered, "I see a beautiful and praiseworthy mountain and a cloud enveloping it." Abraham then asked his (other) young men (Eliezer and Yishmael), "Do you see anything?" They said, "We see nothing but desert." Abraham then responded to them, "Stay here with the donkey—since the donkey doesn't see and you, like him, also do not see, you are similar to the donkey. (Only) I and the lad will go yonder"" (Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Vayeira 23).

This midrash never explains why Abraham and Isaac were able to perceive that which Eliezer and Yishmael clearly failed to see. We are therefore left to focus on the obvious. We must point out the critical, yet simple, difference between the former and the latter. Eliezer and Yishmael were on a purposeless journey. They were out on a hike or a walk that required nothing of them and who they were. In contrast, Abraham and Isaac were on a journey of ultimate sacrifice, a path that made ultimate demands of who they were and how they perceived the world.

For a moment, think of those times in your life where you were fortunate to gain greater vision of yourself, your family, or your community. I would venture to guess that for many of us, those moments of vision and personal revelation are intimately interlinked and connected to times in our lives when we were willing to give more of ourselves, when we stretched our doing beyond our understanding, and invested beyond what we already thought we had.

Like Isaac and Abraham, when we give more, we also begin to see more. Through giving, we begin to gain a greater vision of whom we truly are and who we can still become, whether as individuals, as a family, or as a community.

Abraham and Isaac saw the mountain because they were on a journey of sacrifice, a journey of ultimate giving. Abraham aptly calls the mountain *Hashem Yirah* (the Lord will be seen) at the end of the narrative because he finally understood that only those who share in the sacrifice also merit sharing in the vision. Ultimately, the binding story is not a call for sacrifice alone. It is a call for vision. It teaches each of us that if we learn to give more, we will also merit seeing more.

Second: we can learn to see more if we can learn to see with each other more.

The Sanzer Rav once shared this story with his Chasidim: “A sojourner had been wandering about in the forest for several days, not knowing the right way out of the forest. Suddenly he saw someone approaching him. He was filled with anticipation and with hope. When they finally met each other, he said to the other, “Tell me my brother, it has been a number of days and I have been lost here in the forest... Can you tell me the way out?” Said the stranger, “Listen my friend, I’ve been lost in this forest also for a couple of days and I don’t know the way out, but one thing I can tell you, the way that I went – don’t go. Instead let us go together and together we will find a new way.””

The Sanzer Rav then turned to his beloved *talmidim*, his students and said, “My friends, together we need to find a new way, because I know that the way I came in won’t get me out, and the way you came in won’t get us out, but together maybe we can get each other out” (as retold by R. David Ingber).

This room right now is filled with visions waiting to inform one another, to guide one another, to enrich one another, to pull one another, to lead one another, to combine with one another.

Have we, each of us, sufficiently taken advantage of the challenge and blessing of living in community?

Being part of our community doesn't only mean that we get to do things together. It must also mean that we open ourselves up to the possibility of seeing the world through each other's eyes. It means that we each develop a willingness to stretch and extend, and ultimately deepen that which our eye previously failed or refused to see.

As a community, when we learn together, we are so good at reexamining the Torah, at seeing it with new and fresh eyes. Can we be just as good, just as open, just as insightful, just as willing to reexamine our own lives through the collective vision of our communal family? Can we learn to see the world together?

Being a part of a community gives each of us this gift—the gift of creating vision greater than our own sight. We can learn to see more if we can learn to see with each other more.

Finally: we can learn to see more if we can learn to close our eyes more.

In the early 1990's, Tony Deifell, a photographer and educator, started a photography program for blind children, called Sound Shadows, at Governor Morehead School for the Blind, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Tony recalls how a lot of time when the photos came back, he and other staff would describe every picture for the students, acting as their eyes for them. Unfortunately, a lot of times the students would aim too high and get the ceiling, or aim too low and get the ground. One such picture of the sidewalk came back. The photo was taken by Lowanda, a teenager at the time. After mentioning that the photo contained an image of the sidewalk, Tony was ready to push it to the side. Lowanda however insisted, "Wait, wait, man, I meant to get a picture of the cracks on the sidewalk, because my cane gets stuck and it's a problem." She then sat down behind the Braille writer and wrote a letter to the superintendent and said, "Dear Dr. Brightwiser, since you have the privilege of sight, you probably don't see

these cracks, you probably walk on them every day, and would you please get them fixed?” And she included pictures as proof of the damage and they were fixed.

Reflecting on this rich experience, Tony writes: “What I loved about this is, Lowanda learned a language that was not her primary language to talk about something that was important to her, a visual language, and the cracks represent cracks across all sorts of lines, racial, gender, economic lines, all these sorts of lines. So as soon as I understood the meaning behind Lowanda’s pictures, all the other pictures in the project became unfamiliar to me, they became new. How do we see the whole? How do we see the bigger picture of something that is beyond us? I think the secret is to look for stories of the cracks” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYZuu939pb8>).

We are blessed with many privileges that habituate our sight and blind our sense of vision. Like Tony and the superintendent, we sometimes don’t notice the cracks. We fail to see those who are marginalized; those who are not at the center of the picture. Simultaneously, like Tony, we also neglect to notice the finer details in life; the subtle nuances that help complete the image. We lack social sensitivity and our sense of creative awe is impoverished.

If we dare close our eyes, if we dare let go of some of our routine privileges, and rid ourselves of our social and spiritual blind spots, we may just learn to notice more, to empathize more, to feel more, and yes, to see more; to see more justly; to see with a greater sense of awe.

I believe that closing our eyes will enable us to see a more complete picture. Indeed, we will see more if we can learn to close our eyes more.

This Rosh HaShanah I want to invite you to join me on an exciting journey. It’s called Judaism with a vision. Our path will take us, our children, and the next generation to a holy mountain. If we give more, we may just merit seeing that mountain. On our way, we may get lost in a forest. The challenges of life may lead us astray. But surely, our collective vision will allow us to find a

new way out. And on our way, we may stumble on some cracks that will require attention and fixing. And those very cracks will teach us to mend our ways.

On this day of Rosh Hashnah, this day of coronation, we plead more than ever, *ve'eineinu tiraainah malchotecha*, may our eyes perceive Your Kingdom, o Lord. On this day, more than ever, we are asking for ultimate vision. We are seeking vision from the King.

Today, let us learn to give more in hope that are sacrifices teach us to see more.

Today, let us see with each other more in hope that our sharing of sight will lead us to a greater vision.

And finally, today, let us close our eyes more so that we may gain vision beyond our immediate sight.

May we merit to perceive the Kingdom of God forever and ever.

Ve'eineinu tiraainah malchotecha ka'hadavr ha'amur be'shirei uzecha (may our eyes perceive Your Kingdom, as is said in the songs of Your splendor).