

Opening Our Eyes:
Seeing what's really out there and what's really inside
Rabbi Andy Markowitz -- Girsch R"H 1

Every time we tried to leave the house growing up, we would inevitably spend at least five minutes looking for my mother's car keys. As my mother's anxiety would ratchet higher -- the search would become more frantic. We'd look under books, root through drawers, rifle through the cushions, basically turning the house upside down looking for the missing keys. Every nook and cranny was searched, we would investigate under items that hadn't been moved in months -- or only ever moved from their rightful place while we engaged in this pre-departure ritual. Inevitably, we'd find them sitting on the table, right out in the open. But we never learned-- next time we wanted to leave, this exact scene would play out. Again. And again. Almost as if the fear of canceling an appointment due to lost keys actually kept us from being able to find them.

Maybe you can relate to this: While preparing for a dinner party, shabbat meal or the like -- we realize that we are missing one crucial ingredient. So what do we do? We run out to the store -- run down each aisle -- frantically searching for the one thing that will make the meal a success! We are short on time -- so we quickly scan where it "ought" to be (if we were stocking the shelves) -- so then we scamper over to a different section of the store to check where it "might be". After 10 minutes of running from one end of the supermarket to the other -- we begin to panic. It's not here -- how can they not have the one item that we need... We try one last hail mary play, The "Philly Special" if you will, -- we ask ask a clerk if they know where the item is. They kindly take us by the hand to the very first place we checked and pull it off of a shelf. An eye level shelf. In our haste and anxiety -- we failed to see that the item we were looking for was right where we thought it would be in the first place...

That's kind of how the world works isn't it? Whatever we are desperately searching for - - ends up being right in front of us the entire time. Sometimes we are so distracted by the problem that we fail to see the solution, however simple and visible it may be.

Then there are times when we are so overcome by the problem, that we blind ourselves to it in order to avoid the stress of finding a solution. For example, while living in Los Angeles this past year, Michelle and I were so overcome by the pervasiveness of homelessness in the city that we eventually became blind to the problem. Tent cities under overpasses, women begging

outside of supermarkets, and men pushing shopping carts full of everything they owned faded into the background. Our hearts ached with the plight of those less fortunate, and to protect ourselves we became blind to the problem. When we searched for a solution but couldn't find one, we became blind to the problem. It became easier to live our lives blind to the human suffering all around us than to wrestle and engage with it each day. Simply put, it wasn't convenient for us to keep our eyes open to the world around us. We had jobs and appointments to keep and food and diapers to buy.

Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the stress of the problem that we are blinded to the solution. Other times we are so overwhelmed by the stress of the problem that we are willingly blinded to the problem itself. Two types of blindness-- neither results in growth, change, or improvement.

The author Herman Hesse writes in his epic, *Siddhartha*:

"When someone seeks," said Siddhartha, "then it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing, to take in nothing because he always thinks only about the thing he is seeking, because he has one goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal."

The thing is -- having a specific goal is not always a bad thing. If we are to open ourselves to the world without expectation, without a goal in mind -- we wouldn't accomplish much at all. In order to complete a specific task, we need to narrow our focus. In order to get from point a to point b while driving, we had better keep our eyes on the road. But having a goal ceases to be of service when it blinds us to what the world around us is presenting. There is a balancing act we all must engage in-- be open enough to the world to let it in, but be focused enough to pursue goodness and justice.

Keys and cooking ingredients may seem trivial, and conquering homelessness may seem insurmountable, but today we read about a woman whose own fear and stress blinded her to the solution right in front of her. And whose discomfort with the cries of her own child blinded her to the problem. For her, opening her eyes was a matter of survival. We are, of course, talking about the story of Hagar and, her son, Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's camp into the wilderness. Our text depicts a woman who frantically searches for water without finding it. We see Hagar become so overwhelmed with her reality that she puts her son down and abandons him

because she cannot bear to hear his exhausted crying any longer. In this passage we are introduced to a woman who's situation as become so unbearable that she is blind to any possible solution that might even be in front of her face.

Genesis 21:19

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.

בראשית כ"א:י"ט
וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם
וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֶמְקַת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁק אֶת־
הַנֶּעֱר:

1. Why did it take God to open Hagar's Eyes?
2. What might have been blocking her sight?
3. When do you/we become "Laser focused" on a problem, issue, moment -- that we miss what is actually going on around us?

Sforno on Genesis 21:19:1

He granted her the instinct to look for water in the place where she would find it. She had not been blind previously so that her eyes had to be "opened."

ספורנו על בראשית כ"א:י"ט:א'
ויפקח אלהים את עיניה נתן בה דעת
להכיר מקום מים שהיה שם כי לא
היתה סומא קודם לכן:

1. Da'at -- what does it mean that God have Hagar the "instinct" or the "knowledge" to do look for the well?
2. Who serves to provide us with helpful reminders for/when we need to take a look around ourselves?

Radak on Genesis 21:19:1

perhaps the well had been there all the time but its top had been covered with some material which made no one assume that a well hid underneath such a covering. Alternatively, it was some distance away.

רד"ק על בראשית כ"א:י"ט:א'
ויפקח, אפשר שהיה הבאר שם
והיה מכוסה בין השיחים או היה
רחוק ממנה;

1. What are the things getting in our way of noticing what actually is?
2. What keeps us from finding our "keys" -- those things that we need in order to get on with our lives?
3. What do those coverings do for us? (How do they help us?)

Radak on Genesis 21:19:2

ותלך ותמלא את החמת
G'd expanded her range of vision so that
she now saw the contours of a well she had not previously been
able to see. Perhaps that well had not existed and G'd had
provided it at this time on a temporary basis to keep Ishmael
alive.

רד"ק על בראשית כ"א:י"ט:ב'
כמו ותלך ותמלא, ואלהים הטיב
ראותה לפי שעה לראותו, או לא
היה שם, אבל בקע אלהים את
הארץ באותו מקום ויצאו מים.

1. What does it feel like to finally be able to see something that you hadn't noticed before?
2. How do you imagine Hagar felt at this moment?
3. How do you understand the idea that God created the well in this moment?
4. Have you ever felt a Divine Presence provide a solution that you thought impossible?

Bereishit Rabbah 53:14

"And He (God) Opened her eyes," (Gen.
21:19) Rabbi Binyamin b. Levi said, All
may be presumed to be blind, until the Holy
one, blessed be God, brings light to their
eyes...

בראשית רבה נ"ג:י"ד
(בראשית כא, יט): ויפקח את עיניה, אָמַר רַבִּי בִּנְיָמִין
הַכֹּל בְּתוֹקֶת סוּמִין עַד שֶׁהִקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מֵאִיר אֶת
עֵינֵיהֶם, מִן הַכֹּא וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֵינֶיהָ. (בראשית כא,
יט): וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת הַחֲמַת, הִדָּא אֲמַרְתָּ מְחַסְרַת אֲמִנָּה
הִיְתָה.

1. How are you blind?
2. To what are you blind?
3. What does it take for you to notice things in your "blindspot"?

This final source we reminds me of a blessing that happens to be part of the preliminary morning service... "*Pokeah Ivrim*" -- Praised are you Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who gives eyesight to the blind -- Opens the eyes of the blind. Our tradition seems to insinuate that God has the power to literally give eyesight to those who lack it -- - it would seem that our early rabbis understood this figuratively as well.

It is inherent to the human condition that we will be unable to wholly see the world around us, -- that we will develop "blind spots," whether from emotional upheaval or from a place of convenience as we go through the world. The sources of our blind spots don't matter much-- as they equally keep us from finding the keys -- from finding moments of potential

spiritual growth and connection that constantly surround us. What's more -- our tradition notes that there is a vehicle for reclaiming the things that we we fail to notice, for illuminating that which is hidden to us. By engaging in prayer, learning, communal events, or simply connecting to God -- we are able to begin the process of noticing the contours of the wells right before our eyes.

There are times when we turn to religion, we turn to our Judaism, we turn to our community, we turn to God and we still fail to see that which lies before us... The Be'er Mayim Chaim, at 19th century Chassidic and literary commentary on the Torah -- makes note of this phenomenon in our lives...

Be'er Mayim Chaim, Genesis 21:19:1

This is a gift given by God -- sometimes we can see it, sometimes we can't see it, but we understand that it's still there.

באר מים חיים, בראשית כ"א:י"ט:א'
רוחנית הוא, מתת אלהים הוא, פעם נראה
ופעם אינו נראה, והבן.

We must know and understand that the solutions we seek are still there, whether we can see them or not. When we are stressed, when we are inconvenienced, we suffer from momentary blindness-- and the way out of the darkness is to know that whether we see them or not, the solutions are there. God can, will, and is providing for us.

Just like the frantic searches of my childhood, the keys to living a spiritual life and engaging with the world around us are frequently hidden in plain sight. Just as Hagar was understandably blinded by the overwhelming stressors of being cast out of her home with her young son in tow -- it is easy to see how our own moments of stress and our own discomforts can blind us to what is going on in the world around. Sometimes it takes another set of eyes, sometimes it take a shock to our already over taxed systems to realize that the answer to our problems stands right before us. Sometimes -- it takes God -- or a Divine emissary to push us beyond our instinctual panic -- away from that tunnel vision -- towards a space of healing and allows us to truly see what's going on...

Just a few moments before God gives Hagar the ability to see the well, Genesis 21:17 reads:

Genesis 21:17

בראשית כ"א:י"ז

God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ
אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הַגֵּר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ
הַגֵּר אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר
בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם:

Just as we sometimes get so worked up that we need someone else to point out our keys or last-minute ingredient , Hagar needs God to help process the next step towards caring for her thirsty child. God doesn't simply provide water to the ailing Ishmael, no -- **God recognizes that Hagar needs to take action and move past her emotional paralysis** in order to save both her son and herself. God answers Hagar's blindness through the very thing that blinded her in the first place. God responds to the boy's cries of thirst by pointing Hagar to the solution, not through miraculously offering water from heaven, not through a Divine emissary -- but by allowing Hagar to see that she was an agent in her own story. That she could move through her own problems, that she had the capacity to take care of her son and herself. - Her moment of existential dread is transformed into one of action and agency. Through this interaction, and God interceding, Hagar ceases to be fearful and immobilized, and claims her agency. By knowing that God is with her, by having faith, she is able to see the well. By taking action from a place of faith, she is able to notice that help was there all along.

So too do so many of us fail to take action from a place of faith. We stay mired in our anxieties. We stay trapped in our vulnerability. We become willfully blind to the actions that need to or even can be taken in the world around us **because** of all the energy spent on our insecurities. Because we are afraid or uncomfortable. How many of us talk ourselves out of taking action by saying that our small part won't make a difference in the world around us? How often have we convinced ourselves that the other in need doesn't need what we have to offer? That we aren't strong enough? Not good enough? Not Godly enough? That we are not in the right place or time in this moment do go out and do good? What if our blindness is serving us right now??? (**BIG PAUSE**)

Our text points us towards a response to this line of questioning and self-doubt... The end of Gen 21:17, reads “*B’Asher who Sham*” -- in the place that he happened to be... The Ramban -- the great medieval commentator on the Torah relates that:

Ramban on Genesis 21:17:1

רמב"ן על בראשית כ"א:י"ז:א'

In the place where he is. Hashem provided
their deliverance right where they were,
without the need to travel elsewhere to find
water.

והנכון בעיני בדרך הפשט שיאמר כי שמע אלהים אל
קול הנער במקום אשר הוא שם הודיע אותה שלא
תצטרך ללכת משם אל מעין ובור

Hagar and Ishmael didn't need to travel anywhere else -- or do anything else in order to take action. They were right where they needed to be -- as the water they were looking for was already there. It would have been so much easier for Hagar to give up in that moment and say that she will never find the solution to her problems. In fact, she does turn away so as not to hear the cries of her thirsty son. But God heard his cry. And God answered. It is always easier for us to stop looking for our keys, and exclaim that we will just stay home. We'll just buy something else, or return home empty handed. Here's the thing, our tradition is telling us that throwing up our hands and turning a blind eye is not the spiritual answer -- that's not the answer to our internal strife or vulnerabilities. For it is when we take action from the place of our vulnerabilities -- when we wield our anxieties instead of letting them guide us -- that we are able to remove any/all self imposed blindness and to see the world that is -- not the world as we expect it to be.

When we become so focused on our own stuff that we lose sight of the world around us, we close ourselves off to the idea of change -- the possibility of growth. Hagar couldn't see herself as anything other than a passive participant in her own story until she acted out of faith. It isn't until we open ourselves up to the possibility that the very nature of having a viewpoint limits what we can and cannot see -- that we are able to move beyond those limitations.

“Closing your eyes isn't going to change anything. Nothing's going to disappear just because you can't see what's going on. In fact, things will even be worse the next time you open your eyes. That's the kind of world we live in. Keep your eyes wide open... Closing your eyes and plugging up your ears won't make time stand still.”

— Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

There's a difference between not being able to see something because it is hidden, and not being able to see something because we have blinded ourselves, we have intentionally closed

our eyes. And in this season of doing *cheshbon hanefesh* of serious soul searching, it is easy to become paralyzed by the thought of just how much internal work we need to do. This time period, this gift granted to us by God offers us the chance to change -- to make our lives a little bit more intentional -- to take a little more action. However, if we use this opportunity to only change the way that we understand ourselves, we are willfully blinding ourselves to the *cheshbon hanefesh* -- the soul accounting for the larger world around us. The pitfall of this season of repentance and change is that we become so mired in our own inequities and the things that we want to change about ourselves that we fail to take notice of the things we want to change in the world around us.

Be wary -- lest we become like Hagar in the moments before God heard Ishmael's cry -- lest we lose sight of our own capabilities our own capacity to to be harbingers of larger social and societal change due to our tight focus on our own personal inequities. But here's the thing -- each of us carry vulnerabilities, anxieties, weaknesses and hurts that can and do have the capacity to blind us. The mere questioning of WHAT WE CAN DO to help shape the world is a manifestation of these very same insecurities.

Chomat Anakh on Psalms 146:8:1

This is a possible reference to the "Ba'al T'Shuvah" -- *insert fancy gematria play here...* -- And this references/hints that the one who sins/commits a transgression is like a blind person... And it is through T'Shuvah that God opens up light that brightens our eyes -- and illuminates our transgressions, which allows us to do T'Shuvah. And from there we continue to redeem the light of the holy sparks we tore/hid through our transgressions and fell prey to our evil inclination --

חומת אנך על תהלים
קמ"ו:ח"א'
ה' פוקח עורים וכו'. אפשר
דבכלל מיירי נמי ורמז על בעל
תשובה... ורמז דבחטא הן בעון
הם סומים... ועל ידי התשובה
ה' פוקח עורים שמאיר עיניהם
להכיר בחטאם ולשוב. ומזה
נמשך להוציא לאור ניצוצי
הקדושה אשר בחטאתו המה
כרעו ונפלו בסט"א...

The process of T'Shuvah that we engage in during this time of year is meant to remove anything and everything that limits our perception. In order remove these spiritual blinders, we need to take action. Not the frantic action of looking for our keys when we needed to be out the door 10 minutes ago -- Rather the actions of engaging with the unseen parts of our world.

Taking action to see the people, places and things that we would rather not. Taking action to notice the contours of what actually are -- and not what is convenient to us in the moment. For every time we willfully blind ourselves, every time we allow ourselves to become passive players in our own stories (and the story of the larger world) we are purposefully putting the blinders back on -- limiting the possibility of what we can perceive.

So in this season of T'Shuvah and self-reflection -- I challenge each of us to follow the words of the great modern sage Bob Nestor (Marley) --

“Open your eyes, look within. Are you satisfied with the life you're living?”

— Bob Marley

Shana Tovah U'Metukah-- a happy, healthy and reflective New Year.