

The World as We Are – Parashat Vayera

My colleague, Rabbi Michael Gold, tells the story of two monks who were arguing about a flag blowing in the breeze. One monk said, “It is the flag that causes the waving.” The other monk said, “No, it is the wind that causes the waving.” “If there was wind with no flag there would be nothing to move,” insisted the first monk. “But if there was flag with no wind, the cloth would remain still,” retorted the second. Back and forth they went, arguing and challenging one another, until they finally brought the matter before the great Zen master Hui Neng. “My dear friends,” began the sage. “Ultimately, you are both wrong. It is neither the flag that causes the waving nor is it the wind that causes the waving. In the end, it is your very own mind that causes the waving.” And with that, the matter was settled.

Indeed it is the case that our very own minds shape how we see and experience the world around us. Even matters of a so-called “objective” nature are often perceived differently by different people as the famous blue-black vs. white-gold dress controversy illuminated a few years back where individuals looking at the exact same garment saw its color in different ways. How much more so do idiosyncratic elements shape perspective when it comes to subjective elements of human existence – what we value or believe in and even what we think or consider to be true. We are influenced by our personal histories and by our preferences, by our outlooks and by our emotions. Our thoughts are not necessarily consistent and often in flux. How we feel on a particular day can affect how we see the world.

Over the last year much attention has been paid to the increasingly siloed nature of modern experience, whereby more and more we come in contact only with others who think and believe as we do to the exclusion of those who might challenge our ideas. We choose newspapers and TV broadcasts and websites that align with our perspective, rejecting opposing ones as being overly biased or practicing

poor journalism; our Facebook feeds are intentionally designed to favor content consistent with our political leanings; we tend to consult for advice or information friends who share our viewpoints. Psychologists have documented a phenomenon called confirmation bias whereby humans seem hard-wired “to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one’s preexisting beliefs or hypotheses.”¹ As Dr. Shahram Heshmat, of the University of Illinois at Springfield, writes, “Confirmation bias suggests that we don’t perceive circumstances objectively [but rather] pick out those bits of data that make us feel good because they confirm our prejudices. Thus, we may become prisoners of our assumptions.”²

It is not only regarding matters of the mind but also matters of the heart and spirit that our judgment can often become clouded and easily influenced by factors other than objective reality alone. In fact, the notion that humans can fail to notice things that are right plain in front of us and also, at times, see things that don’t actually exist, is a central theme of our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Vayera*. In the eloquent words of the *Etz Haim Humash*, “Even as the opening notes of a symphony often sound a theme that will be developed in various ways throughout the piece, the opening word of this fourth *parashah* of Genesis proclaims the theme: *Va’yera*, ‘The Lord appeared/was seen.’ One incident after another involves people seeing or not seeing God.”³

The *humash* is indeed correct in pointing out the recurrent emphasis on seeing and not seeing that occurs in our Torah portion this week. Perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon comes in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham’s first son and his mother, whom Sarah orders to have expelled from the household sometime after her own son, Isaac, is born. Abraham, urged by God to

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias>

³ *Etz Hayim Humash*, p. 99.

follow his wife's instructions, sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with bread and a skin of water but quite quickly the provisions are depleted. Hagar leaves Ishmael under a desert bush saying to herself, "Let me not look on as the child dies" (Genesis 21:16); her despair is profound. Ultimately, Hagar comes to hear an angel's voice which tells her that she should have no fear for Ishmael will live and one day become a great nation. When she opens up her tear-filled eyes, there is a well of water before her and she gives the boy drink.

Where was this well of water before the angel appeared? Is it possible that God created it into existence by Divine fiat, exactly at this precise moment in order to nourish the parched Ishmael? Or perhaps had the well been there all along but Hagar, in her emotional pain and devastation, could not see it until she calmed a bit and rallied her spirit to fight for survival. The *Etz Hayim Humash* suggests the latter interpretation writing, "God performed a miracle, not by creating a well where none had been before, but by opening Hagar's eyes so that she could see what she had previously been blind to, the existence of life-sustaining resources in her world."⁴ How often do we, too, fail to see the possibilities before us, our vision obscured by anger or fear or hopelessness or despair. Seeing takes more than powers of visual acuity; seeing also takes powers of courage and imagination.

A second example of humanity's ability to either see or not see comes from the iconic story of the *Akkedah* (Binding of Isaac) which also features in this week's Torah portion. As Abraham, Isaac, and their servants initially set out for Har HaMoriah where the near sacrifice will occur, the Torah reads: "*Bayom haslishi vayisa Avraham et eynav vaya'ar hamakom merachok* – On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar" (Genesis 22:4). The well-known rabbinic collection, *Bereshit Rabbah*, points out that the word for place here is "*makom*," a term that is also used as one of the many

⁴ *Etz Hayim Humash*, p. 115.

names of God (as when we say *Hamakom y'nachem etchem* in comforting mourners). Based on this word-play, the rabbis understand the verse just quoted as meaning that Abraham looked up on the third day and saw not a physical place but rather the ephemeral Presence of God. They imagine that Abraham asked Isaac if he saw the Divine Presence too, and his son did; Abraham then asked the servants if they saw God's Presence, and they did not. The *Etz Hayim Humash* writes, "Abraham, perceiving the distinction between those who are sensitive to God's presence and those who are blind to it, left the servants behind as he rose to a higher level with Isaac...One of the gifts with which spiritually sensitive people are blessed is the ability to see the presence of God in their daily experiences."⁵ Yet again, seeing in our Torah portion is not merely a matter of physical perception. Seeing is rather a marker of spiritual insight.

In the Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 55b the rabbis teach, "A man is shown only what is suggested by his own thoughts." And this line is paraphrased, perhaps with a bit of poetic license, by the French-Cuban novelist Anais Nin who writes "We do not see the world as it is. We see the world as we are." Indeed, if we are despondent and believe we are destined to die, we may not even notice a life-sustaining spring of water right before our very eyes. And if we are faithful and trust in God's providence, we may see the Divine Presence even in a place that others deem a mere mountain vista. So many experiences of life are ambiguous, and our interpretations are more often than not shaped by our inner state of being. If we are generous of spirit and trust in the general goodness of others, we will imagine a friend's overdue phone-call as the product of her busy work schedule; if we are suspicious and see ourselves always the victim, we will imagine the oversight a spiteful snub.

⁵ Etz Hayim Humash, p. 115 and p.99

An old folktale tells of a newcomer to town who asks the first person he sees, “How are the people who live here?” “How were they in your former town,” asks his new neighbor. “Quite terrible,” the newcomer replies. “Well, then, you’ll probably find them terrible here too,” the man responds. The newcomer travels on and asks the next person that he sees the same question, “How are the people who live here?” “How were they in your former town?,” his new friend asks. “They were wonderful,” the newcomer insists. “Well, then, you’ll probably find them wonderful here too,” the woman responds. Indeed, the way we judge past experience is not at all a bad indicator of future performance. If we tend to see people as lovely and interesting, we will generally see them that way no matter our circumstances. If we tend to see people as selfish and annoying, that too will be true no matter in what company we ultimately find ourselves. Seeing is not really a matter of the eyes. Seeing is rather a matter of the mind and spirit.

I close this morning with a last story, also shared by Rabbi Gold, about a huge supernova explosion that took place in the year 1054 in Medieval Europe and eventually became what is known as the Crab Nebula. Astronomers as far away as China, Japan, Arabia, and even North and South American recorded the event but strangely there is no documentation of the incident anywhere in Europe. How is this possible? Could it be that Europeans did not witness the explosion which took place in their very backyard?

One probable explanation for this mystery is that such an astronomical event went against the mindset of Medieval Europe, at that time under the strong influence of Aristotle and the Catholic Church. In Gold’s words, “To these Europeans, the heavens were rotating spheres that were unchangeable. Heavenly bodies did not explode; they simply circled the earth for eternity. Such an explosion would go

against their very belief system.”⁶ As a result, the European community rejected what they saw and certainly never recorded it for posterity. What they did (or didn’t) believe caused them to question what they actually saw.

“We do not see the world as it is. We see the world as we are.” And so, to the best of our ability, we should try to prime our hearts – and by extension our eyes – for wonder, for good, and for blessing.

Perhaps we’ll even merit to see a life-sustaining well or an exploding supernova. And for sure, we’ll open ourselves up to seeing the Presence of God.

Shabbat Shalom!

⁶ Rabbi Michael Gold, *Parashat Vayera: We See the World As We Are*, email of 11/1/17