

A One-Eyed World?

Yom Kippur 5779

Rabbi Wendi Geffen

A while back, I needed to get my driver's license renewed. And part of that process required an eye exam where one places the top of their face into a small, dark metal viewfinder. On the display inside are three columns: the first two have 3 letters running down each column and the last column is empty, and you are told to read what you see. So I read what I saw: BZT, HGU. The DMV attendant then said: "Now read the letters on the right." So at first I laughed because I knew this was a trick question: there were no letters on the right. But she didn't laugh. She just repeated, "Read the letters on the right." I remained baffled. Clearly annoyed, she said, "Lady, are both of your eyes open?" At which point I realized I had inadvertently closed my left eye. Sure enough, when I opened it, 3 more letters magically appeared in the right column. I read the last 3 letters and boom, license renewed!

This ability to see the world through two eyes, called binocular vision, is a phenomenon unique to humans and other animals that reside higher up on the food chain. Because our eyes are positioned on the front of our heads, our two eyes work *together* to see the world around us. Other animals that reside lower on the food chain possess monocular vision with eyes on either side of their heads. For them, there is little to no overlap between the visual fields of their two eyes, so they never get the full picture of their surroundings. Having binocular vision gives us much better depth perception - the ability to perceive our world in three dimensions. It places us on the fitter side of the Darwinian scale - because we have a fuller, deeper perception of the world, something that nature understands as a keen advantage. Despite this, most of us in the modern world seem to see it differently, because, as you likely have already observed about our modern era, we are living through notably one-eyed times.¹

Earlier this year, I read a really eye-opening article about this exact phenomenon. I implore you to listen to the following quote in its entirety. The article opened as follows: Quote: "We live in two Americas. In one America, a mentally unstable president selected partly by Russia lies daily and stirs up bigotry that tears our social fabric. In another America, a can-do president tries to make America great again as lying journalists stir up hatred that tears our social fabric. The one thing we all agree on: Our social fabric is torn. In each America, people who inhabit the other are often perceived as not just obtuse but also dangerous. Half of Democrats and Republicans alike say in polls that they are

¹ To some extent, technology is to blame. Recent studies report that Americans spend roughly half of their waking hours on a screen, and that's not only the primary way we receive our information, but it also largely influences how we form our opinions. Websites are coded to learn our preferences and then feed them back to us, presenting us with goods we will already be inclined to purchase and news that best aligns with our leanings. As a result, as Henry Kissinger rightly explains in his astute albeit disturbing book *World Order*: "Two different people appealing to a search engine with the same question do not necessarily receive the same answers....The discussion and exchange of ideas has for millennia provided an emotional and psychological dimension in addition to the factual content of the information exchanged. It supplies intangibles of conviction and personality. Now the culture produces a curious reluctance to engage in face-to-face interaction, especially on a one-to-one basis."

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literally afraid of the other political party.”² End quote. Can you see it now: US currency will depict two great eagles, instead of one, pushing each other as they vie for space, with the banner E Pluribus **Duo** in a red font atop the eagle on the right and blue font atop the eagle on the left!

But make no mistake, the dividing line between these two Americas isn't so easily delineated. It is complicated and haphazard, running through our neighborhoods, our schools, even through this sanctuary. For many of us, it runs through our most personal spaces, through our homes and through our dinner tables. The augers of these extensive lines have bored through the core of nearly every one of our central communal structures. They've created an extensive network of fissures, with the structures themselves beginning to crumble and fall apart.

Consider the big picture of higher education in America today. In high schools and universities across our country, so-called “Safe Spaces” create cover for the silencing of diverse and conflicting opinions. Microaggressions and trigger warnings have paralyzed the complicated and messy conversations that always proved necessary for nuanced and eye-opening learning.

Or let's focus on something more personal: what has sadly become one of the most divisive topics for the American Jewish people: Israel. The following presents an honest picture of the complex situation:

About a year ago, I spoke with an older congregant who recounted his personal experience in watching the birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948 and the miracles of the 6 Day War. Had it not been for Israel, our history might very well have ended at the conclusion of World War II. He spoke of his own daily experiences with anti-Semitism growing up on the South Side of Chicago, where, from the age of 6, he was beaten up every day on his walk to school and kicked in the stomach while being called a dirty Jew. He knows that Israel was and will remain so very important, not only because of history, but also because history repeats, and, as a Jewish people, we cannot afford to do anything but offer our unwavering support for our Jewish homeland. As such, he was deeply upset when his college-age grandson shared with him that he too supports Israel, but also feels it is important to voice his criticism of some policies of the Israeli government and what he called Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians and Israeli-Arabs. Our congregant was utterly devastated and disappointed, embarrassed and angry that his grandson had betrayed not only Israel, not only our people, but his very own grandfather. And he had told him so! At which point, his grandson accused his grandfather of abdicating his moral responsibilities as a Jew, the ones that his grandfather had taught him. He questioned how his grandfather could just ignore half of the story and look the other way at the injustices being perpetrated in the name of the Jewish people. Their conversation ended with slammed doors after a pronouncement

² Kristof, Nicholas. “You're Wrong! I'm Right!” *New York Times*. Feb 17, 2018

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that, until the other came around, there was nothing more that needed to be spoken between them.

So many of you have shared with me and my clergy colleagues similar stories of the rupturing of your families and your friendships as a result of these one-eyed understandings. Some of you have shared that when you hear about who someone voted for, or that they support a given policy offered by whatever the wrong political party is, you no longer trust that person. You question not only their integrity, but also their intentions. And not just in relation to the issue of disagreement, but, moreover, in relation to all things. The truth is, there is no longer anything that can be said that has not been commodified and politicized by these one-eyed views. Whether it is Israel or immigration, security or asylum seekers, women or men, terrorism or violence in our schools, race, class, economy, hunger, poverty, even just the use of certain otherwise benign words, each and all of them are now seen as code for one particular view of the world or another. Last year, I received a letter accusing me of “complicity with Democrats” for my use of the word “bridge” in a sermon and another accusing me of “complicity with Republicans” for using the word “wall” - in the VERY SAME SERMON! These absolutist one-eyed, all or nothing attitudes have literally paralyzed us, forcing everyone’s hand to a place that, I must tell you, does not lead anywhere that is good.

I have preached before you so many times about the dangers of this siloed, like-minded blindness to which, everyone, on all sides, is succumbing. The one-eyed world is a problem because with only one eye open, we literally do not see the other side. We cannot see it. It is not there. But the thing is, it is there! And we are going to have to open both of our eyes, should we prefer to stay on the upper end of the food chain. We might think we are “safer” in our self-reflective filter bubbles, where we are protected from the so-called evils of confrontation from the view of the other side. But don’t be fooled. Safe doesn’t mean comfortable; and the one-eyed world is notably dangerous, because *it* is the doorway to fascism. *It* is the doorway to dehumanization. *It* is what leads to violence and war. And it has no place in our Jewish faith, no less in this synagogue.

Over and over again, Jewish sacred texts implore us not to fall victim to our baser desires for a one-eyed world view.³ We need not look further than this morning’s Torah portion, *Nitzavim*, in which God establishes the covenant with all Jewish people for all

³ From a historical vantage, the people most isolated in our tradition were the priests. Dedicated to a life of service to God, they lived and worked in the Temple, where they didn’t see a lot of the rest of the world most of the time. The only real view they had of anything beyond themselves and their sacrificial work was in their capacities as ancient medical authorities to diagnose the extent of another person’s illness to determine whether they were pure or impure, and thereby could or could not participate in Jewish communal life in a given moment. Of note is the fact that our ancient rabbinical commentators required that the examining priest have two functioning eyes, so as to see not just the pure or impure parts - but the fullness of their being instead. A priest with only one-eye opened could not effectively measure reality. Our tradition has always understood that no matter how singular our experience or viewpoint, the demand of being in relationship with others requires both eyes open.

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time. The key text: “***Atem nitzvaim hayom kulchem*** - **You** stand this day, **all of you**, before the LORD your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials...your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer—to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God...” Traditional commentaries wonder why “all of you” doesn’t speak for itself, and why the text lists specific groups by name, as well. Ultimately, they conclude the groups are listed to demonstrate the incredible diversity of everyone who is considered a part of the people. The groups that are listed represent the most to the least powerful, as well as the most inside the establishment to those very far out on the periphery. *Even* those who were not Jewish themselves, but who had thrown their lot in with the Jewish people, are counted.⁴ When it comes to our one Jewish people, our *Am Echad*, we must remember that everybody counts, as the unity of our covenant is foundationally based on the diversity of our community.

From a Jewish vantage, why is this so important? Because to make God manifest in the world, to fulfill our vision for a world that is healed and whole, everyone will be needed to do the work. All viewpoints are required. After the Torah describes the complete and expansive inclusion of everyone from the periphery to the center, it offers this charge: “SEE, I have set before you life and blessing, death and curse. Choose life to really live.” We were called then and we are called today to open both of our eyes to **see** the choices in front of us, and then to choose blessing - so that we might together, all of us, journey on a path of loving God and walking in God’s ways. And those ways are not the reserve of any singular political party, any singular viewpoint, but are as diverse and expansive as the sands of the sea.

The ironic twist of the one eyed world is that while we might assume that what we are blinded to is the world of the other, the truth is we are blinded to *ourselves* - to our truths - to the depth of what is really behind what and why we believe what we do. When we open our other eye, we gain greater understanding not just of the other’s view, but more importantly, of our own. Remember the congregant and grandson who had stopped speaking? After he recounted the conversation, I asked him why it was that he felt so assured in his views. “I guess it has to do with my experiences,” he said. “I firmly believe that Israel has every right to do whatever she needs to do to defend herself. Of course I don’t like that Israel’s hand has been forced to occupy, but what does the world expect Israel to do when everybody wants to destroy her?” I then asked if he felt his grandson had had similar experiences to his when growing up. To which he said: “Oh, of course not. Thankfully, my grandson grew up never experiencing any anti-semitism and only seeing Israel as a strong, independent nation that proved just as established as

⁴ Rashi notes that woodchopper and water drawer refer to the Gibeonites (29:10), a Canaanite nation with whom Joshua made a deal to allow them to throw their lot in with the Jewish people in exchange for safe passage. Nachmanides notes that the use of the word “even” in vs 10 denotes the inclusion of the mixed multitude whom Moses designated as a protected class. Abarbanel comments that Moses knew the extremes of the group, and wanted everyone included so that they would not be discounted at a later point.

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any other first world country.” So I asked him if he thought he could, just for a moment, understand how his grandson could come to see Israel as he did. And did that then make him anti-zionist or just a different kind of zionist? Finally, I asked if he thought he could engage his grandson in a conversation inviting him into the very same questions: could he ask his grandson to visualize himself in his grandfather’s shoes and imagine how he would see Israel if he were him? Not for the purpose of changing the other’s mind, but rather for the purpose of expanding their fields of vision to include the possibility of the other’s view. Could an invitation to each of them to open their other eye allow them to see each other once again?

There is a strange ritual in the Torah for the treatment of one who who contracted an ancient illness called *Tzaraat* - said to manifest when one spoke *lashon hara* or falsehoods about another person. The illness was considered incredibly dangerous, as it was highly contagious, and as such, upon receiving a diagnosis, the afflicted person was sent to the outside gates of the town or village, essentially in a quarantine. Once there, they were to stand at the gates and tell any passerby that they had *tzaraat*, yelling out “*Tamei, Tamei* - Impure, Impure!” presumably so the passerby would know not to get too close, so as not to put themselves in harm’s way. But the Talmud⁵ sees the purpose of this ritual somewhat differently. In addition to a public health warning, it suggests a second purpose for the call of the afflicted: so as to “inform the public of his misfortune, so that the public will beg on his behalf for mercy. Thus, the cry of “*Tamei, Tamei!*” is not intended to alert the passerby to the existence of [illness] alone, but also to arouse their sympathy for the afflicted person.” Put together, the ritual causes each person, both the afflicted and the passerby to actually “see” the other, not through a singular lense of fear or repulsion, but rather through a lense of empathy: for the afflicted to be put in a position of caring for the condition of the passerby and for the passerby to be put in a position of caring for the condition of the afflicted.

The truth is, until we are willing to truly open our eyes and expand our fields of view to include those we have otherwise blocked from our sight lines, we will remain in the stalemate of impotence that has lead to our current national paralysis. Let me clear: It’s my way or the highway leads to the highway. Every time. It is only when each of us opens both of our eyes that we will find ways to solve the problems that not only divide us, but prove the truest threats to our lives, our people, our country, and our planet.

So on this Yom Kippur, this day of looking within, let us gaze deeply to ask and answer the hard questions: Am I inadvertently or consciously closing one of my eyes? Am I strong enough to open it, to see in full view that to which I have willfully blinded myself up until now? And what commitments am I willing to make to assure that I keep both of my eyes open in this new year, dedicated to seeing each other and our world for the deepest fullness it has to offer?

⁵ Moed Katan 5a

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Remember that whole thing about our binocular vision and how it proves a key component of our ability to survive as a species? Of note is that Darwin never actually wrote about survival of the fittest. That was Herbert Spencer. Instead, Darwin's key theory called "the sympathy hypothesis" would be better named Survival of the Kindest. In his research, Darwin concluded: "Those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best."⁶ So Darwin didn't advocate brute strength or the "if you're not with us you're against us" mentality as the top indicator for a community's advancement and evolution, but rather, he suggested the key to societal longevity rested with how sympathetic, how kind, and how compassionate its members were. Were they able to see the world from each other's view, to feel pulled and connected to each other? Without kindness and compassion, the survival and flourishing of our species would have been unlikely. It is in fact only when we really see each other that we merit our place at the top of all of the other animals over whom we preside.

In Judaism, we do not get to see what God looks like. But our tradition teaches that when we gaze into each other's eyes, widely and fully, it is there that we can see the face of God. May it be so in our day. *Gmar Chatimah Tovah* - may we be inscribed and sealed for kindness, for clarity, and for goodness in the New Year.

⁶ Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man*. p. 72

For more on this, read:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/born-be-good/200902/darwins-touch-survival-the-kindest>