

Neighbor, Do You See Me?

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5780 / 2019

I go to my little gym about 4 times a week. I travel down Grant Ranch Boulevard towards Bowles where inevitably I meet the number 59 bus going to Dakota Ranch. Coming back, I always pass the same bus, this time travelling to Littleton Station. It's usually the same driver, an older man with salt and pepper hair, more salt than pepper. He is usually looking straight ahead, and I wonder to myself, "Does he ever see ME?" Does he realize that he passes the same white Subaru Impreza every morning at around 8:00 a.m. and again at about 9:30? Perhaps he muses to himself, "Hmmm, funny how I see that same little white car every morning, coming and going. I wonder who she is?" Maybe I'm just weird, but I always get a little excited when I see a vehicle that I know I've seen before. I recognize the same bumper stickers that proclaim their love for Steamboat or that they voted for the Bush / Cheney ticket in 2004. There's the car I've seen pretty often that has a fender that came from a different color car, and this little original Volkswagen bug, still wrapped in it's original coat of beige paint. There's this strange desire to say to the occupants, "Hey, I think you must live near me because I often see your car! How are you?" And I wonder if they recall seeing MY car or me sitting behind the wheel. I wonder where they are going? To get a loaf of bread, to pick up a child, to take an elderly parent to the doctor, to go hiking? Are they having a good day or are they grappling with pain or worry? Have you seen that commercial with Cyndi Lauper and others describing their relief from psoriasis achieved by taking a certain medication?

Each individual in the ad shows their clear skin and says, “See me.” They are saying, “See ME, not my skin condition. See ME, the real me. See ME, my authentic self. See ME, a human being with a soul and a spirit that needs to be nourished.”

The sense to which I refer here, the sense of sight, is more than just the physical performance of the orbs in our eye-sockets – more than the workings of the retina, optic nerve, and vitreous humor. Sight – real sight – goes beyond that. It’s not only the ability to take in visual imagery. Sight is perception... recognition...openness... and caring about others.

This morning we read the traditional Torah reading for the second day of Rosh HaShanah, the account of Avraham being commanded to go to ארץ המריה often translated as the “Land of Moriah,” or even “Mount Moriah.” There, Avraham is to offer up his son, Yitzchak, whom he dearly loves, in service to God. Sight (both of the definitions I’ve discussed) features prominently in this story with which we wrestle each year, in several different and subtle ways.

Avraham and Yitzchak set out on their journey. On the third day, וַיִּרְאֵה אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם מֵרֶחֶק Avraham lifts up his eyes and he sees that the place is just off in the distance. What could Avraham be thinking at that very moment? ... What was Avraham really seeing? ... Did he come to a realization? ... Did he envision what would transpire? As you know, the two arrive at Moriah, and Avraham lays the wood down, ties Yitzchak onto it, and with power and conviction, raises the knife into the air. A messenger from God intervenes and at that moment,

וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְאֵה וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחַר נֶאֱמָרוּ בְּסֹבֶד

Avraham lifted his eyes and there he saw a ram with its horns caught in a thicket. What if Avraham had not seen the ram?

Would he have proceeded with the slaying of his beloved son? What if he had not lifted his eyes at all?

And now let us explore the Hebrew word for the place to which Avraham must go: **מריה**. It's a word for a place that is mentioned only twice in the entire TaNaKH, our Bible: here, in Genesis, and once again in the Book of Second Chronicles accounting the building of Solomon's Temple. These are two rather consequential stories describing two monumental, transformative events. We can find some indicators as to the significance of this place in the word play that's going on here. The letters that make up the word **מריה** are drawn from several other Hebrew words of various meanings that combine beautifully to ascribe a name to this place of such Biblical importance.

One of our most noted commentators, Rashi, links **מריה** to the Hebrew word for "instruction," the letters of which give us the word **תורה** Torah (the scroll from which we read that contains God's teachings and instruction, and the word for "teacher." According to this understanding, we could say that the name **ארץ המריה** means "land of teaching" or even "land of Torah." This sounds like a rather appropriate place for Avraham to learn an important lesson and definitely for the Temple to be constructed. Think about what instruction does for us... Through the acquisition of knowledge, our minds open to the truths of the world. We *understand*, we see, how the world works and how we can make our journey through it more fulfilling. But wait there's more...

We also have letters from which we make the word **מרור** *maror*, the bitter herbs we eat on Pesach. On the mount of Moriah **מריה** there were difficult, bitter decisions to be made and the shedding of burning, bitter tears – tears we wept in our holy Temple as we prayed for repentance, life, and healing. Also present are the letters spelling **יה** *Yah*, one of the names for God. God's presence was strongly felt and heard on **מריה**.

Other letters come from the Hebrew verb **ירא** *yarah* meaning to be filled with awe and reverence, the feeling that filled the souls of Avraham and all those who later worshipped at the Temple. *Yirah*, the awe and wonder of God, is one way in which we can “see” God and experience God. It's in the gentle wind on your face, the rolling of thunder, the warm rays of the sun on our skin, the happy splashing of a waterfall, the smell of the Ponderosa Pines, and for me, even when Charlie Blackmon or Nolan Arenado hits a home run. We see God and experience God when we hug someone we care about, help someone in need, protest an injustice, sit with an elderly relative, or hold a new baby.

And lastly, we have the letters from the word **ראה** *ra'ah* meaning “to see.” **מריה** is, thus, a place of seeing, of gaining sight and insight, where one can be given the gift of perceiving what is right and good. Near the end of Avraham's encounter on Moriah, **וַיִּקְרָא אֲבִרְהָם שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְיָ יִרְאֶה** Avraham called the name of the place, *Adonai Yireh*. Adonai will see. Adonai will see. God will see ME, God will care for ME, God will believe in ME and trust ME to do what is good, as the prophet Micah enjoins us to do: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

In our tradition, seeing or understanding and doing what is good are closely linked. God sees favor in those who serve and follow God's commandments of justice and righteousness.

In Exodus 33, we read: "Adonai said to Moshe, to Moses, 'I will do this very thing you have asked, for you have found favor in My sight, and I know you by name.'"

God is saying, "I SEE you Moses. I know who you are. I know you by what you do. From the moment, Moses, that you lifted up your eyes and saw the burning bush, I knew there was something special about you."

God was able to help Moses lift up his eyes, to be lifted and uplifted from his current state. In our morning prayers, we recite *Nissim b'chol Yom*, the prayers of gratitude for the blessings that daily bless our lives. One of the blessings we say is **בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, זוֹקֵף כְּפוּיִים**

It's commonly translated, "We praise You, O God, Sovereign of all Worlds, *who lifts up the fallen*. The Hebrew literally means, "We praise You, O God, *who makes upright those who are bent over*. Perhaps this means that those who are bent over from age or disease will be given the strength to stand up straight. But I think the concept is closely related to the lifting up of one's eyes, to the lifting up of one's head, to seeing, and to acknowledging. We must lift others up in order to truly see them, to acknowledge them, to be aware of their suffering.

Think about ourselves today... We are truly bent over... looking at our cell phones. Kids are getting bone spurs on their skulls and experiencing neck and shoulder pain from it. We are all for the most part guilty, right? When we are bent over, scrolling through facebook and playing word games and Candy Crush, no one can really look in our eyes, and neither can we look into theirs. The eyes are the window to the soul, William Shakespeare wrote, and it's so true. Some of us find eye contact very difficult.

Connecting with the eyes makes one feel vulnerable, scrutinized, examined. It probably took me several years of being a cantor before I felt truly comfortable looking out into the faces of my congregation.

I could do it, but I found it uncomfortable. Perhaps I was afraid that holding one's gaze would reveal too much. Now it is my favorite part of being on the bimah. I look out and see people singing. I look out and see people smiling. I look out and see people talking, and right now, I can look out and see people sleeping.

I see you cry during Mi Shebeirach and I try not to do so myself. I see you mourn your loved ones on yahrzeits, and I know the pain you are feeling, for I have been there, too. I try so hard to see you – to really see you.

This time of year is when we talk about looking inward and taking a spiritual inventory of our deeds and our words, but my friends, I say to you that we need to also work on looking outward. There are so many people that we do not see, and who go unseen. Sometimes it is because we are “really busy.” If I only had a nickel for every time I heard those words... We are caught up in schedules and carpools and working late and sitting in traffic, and yes, texting at the red light, while a dirty, scruffy homeless man stands in the median squinting from the light. We do not lift up our eyes. We do not see.

The prophet Isaiah, whose words are so relevant today, rebukes Israel:

“Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see!

Who is as blind as my servant, and who is as deaf as the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of God? You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen.” (42:18-20)

Have we changed at all since these ancient times? We *still* do not hear the cries of the suffering. We *still* do not see the plight of those who need help. There are children separated from their parents, held in retention centers. There are people dying simply because they have to ration out their insulin.

Thousands of our mentally ill are stigmatized and homeless because funding and care has been cut and medications are just too costly. A growing number of folks just like us are now homeless because they just can't afford their rent or mortgage anymore. Hundreds of our citizens are dying at the hands of gun violence and hatred.

Swastikas are appearing on the walls of our synagogues and doors of our homes, and Jews are losing their lives in their places of worship. The Klan in full white robes is marching once again in North Carolina, just miles from where one of my cantor friends lives. Do we hear the sounds of this misery? No, we do not. Are we blind to the plight of those who are seeking refuge from danger, poverty, war, and gangs? Yes, we are.

The words of Isaiah:

"I, Adonai, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the nations,
7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." (42:6,7)

It is OUR task and obligation to lift up our eyes to the suffering that is around us... to see the poverty, the wanderers of East Colfax, the desolation, the working of three jobs with no money for day care, the deaths of innocents from guns, knives, and the greed of insurance companies. We are Jews – called to be a light unto the nations, to bring light where there is darkness. We are Jews – commanded to love the stranger in our midst, to protect the orphan and the widow, to not do to any person that which is hateful to us. We are Jews – commanded to lift up our eyes and see – to see others as you would like to be seen.

Isaiah promises:

“In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll and out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind will see.” (29:18)

But this will happen only if we meet God at least halfway. *Adonai yireh*.

God will see. Will we? **וַיֵּרָא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק** Avraham saw that the place was not far off. **הַמָּקוֹם** is one of the mystical names for God. Maybe *ha-makom* can be close for us, too. Maybe the time of redemption will come soon. But when? Rabbi Eliezer said that redemption will come to the Jews in the month of Tishrei, at Rosh Hashanah, while Rabbi Joshua argued that it would take place in the month of Nisan, at Passover [Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 10b, Sanhedrin 97b].

I say that redemption will come when we lift up our eyes to see what we can do to bring it about. When will redemption come? When we “master the violence that fills our world. When will redemption come? When we look upon others as we would have them look upon us. *When we see others*. When will redemption come? When we grant to every person (*and that's EVERY person*) the rights that we claim for ourselves.”

Let us labor during these Ten Days of Repentance to open our eyes to the world around us – the world that exists beyond our route to work, beyond our daily grind, beyond the walls of our warm, safe homes. Let us lift up our eyes away from our phones and from our fear and discomfort. Let us open the eyes of our souls and hearts to see the possibilities of what CAN be in our country and the world. Let us see and let us act.