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Kol Rinah  
Parashat Shemot  
January 2, 2016 – 21 Tevet 5776

There's a funny thing about Jews and New Year's. Is it *our* New Year? Is it ok to say "Happy New Year" around January 1<sup>st</sup>? I'm all for it, because we all need as many fresh starts as we can get.

And I imagine many of us made New Year's resolutions. New Year's resolutions are hard, because they take discipline to remain in effect past January 2<sup>nd</sup>. But what kind of change makes a difference—a lasting change on us?

We actually have a character in the Torah this week who is deeply affected by something. I could be talking about Moses here, who sees the Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew. But I'm interested today in talking about God's transformation. The Torah describes the bondage, the agony, the pain, the crying out of the Israelites, suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. But finally, their cry "*rose up to God. God heard their moaning and God remembered God's covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Good looked upon the Israelites, and Good took notice of them*" (Exodus 2:23-25).

God heard, God remembered, God looked upon, God took notice. Or in a slightly different translation, God heard, God remembered, God saw, God knew.

Hearing something can trigger our memory, and then we look more carefully and then we know what's happening. That's one powerful way we change—by hearing, remembering, seeing and knowing.

I want to offer three different readings of the last two of the verbs, seeing and knowing. First, we have Rashi, who says simply that "God knew" means that God paid attention and didn't hide God's eyes. Knowing—the final stage leading to action, the most fundamental and internal and complete of these verbs, requires sustained action—paying attention and seeing even the unpleasant parts, without looking away. That's what leads to change.

Ibn Ezra alternatively suggests that God saw the public subjugation of the Israelites, and but also knew the secret, internal suffering the Israelites experienced. We can see or hear what someone else says or does, but real insight requires us to really know and understand what's inside. When that's us, we can't just see the outside—the behavior we want to change. We have to understand it before we can really change it.

Abarbanel takes ibn Ezra's paradigm of seeing the external and knowing the internal in a different direction, and also reads these four verbs carefully. For him, the first two verbs, hearing and remembering, are related to God's seeing the oppression of the Israelites and remembering the promises to and relationship with them. But the seeing and knowing, the second two verbs, refer to God seeing how the Israelites were following the ways of the Egyptians, and were not good people, but the knowing is God being merciful and compassionate. Knowing is intrinsically connected to compassion, to mercy, to empathy.

We need to see ourselves as not wholly bad, and having merits, as God sees the Israelites, but also as flawed and imperfect, as God also sees the Israelites. If we can appreciate our merits, and be merciful and kind and firm yet forgiving of ourselves for the ways

we are and have not met the mark, then maybe we will be able to change, positively and sustainably.

So to review: Rashi—pay attention to the good and the bad, without closing your eyes. Then you'll be motivated to change.

Ibn Ezra—see the outside, but also try to grasp and understand the inside, the motivations, so that we can really change.

And Abarbanel—see the good together with the bad, and be gentle, kind and merciful and firm with ourselves.

Close your eyes. What's one thing about yourself you really want to change this year. Dwell on it. See it. Why's it bad? No rationalizing allowed. How is hurting you and others? How is destructive? Dangerous?

Why are you persisting in it, or not changing yet? What's motivating you? How would explain it to yourself, even if you wouldn't want to explain to anyone else? How would you explain it to God?

Remember some of your merits—the ways in which you are good. Pat yourself on the back. Forgive yourself for the thing you need to work on. It's ok. And then make a plan, a firm, tough, serious plan of how to get started in 2016 to make a change.

Shabbat shalom.