

WHAT DO YOU SEE?
Erev Rosh Hashana 5772

There is a popular children's book by Bill Martin and Eric Carle called *Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See?* Each page asks a colorful animal what it sees, and it tells us that it sees another colorful animal. *Brown Bear Brown Bear, what do you see? I see a red bird looking at me...Red bird red bird, what do you see? And so on.*

Tomorrow morning we will recite the powerful *Un'tanneh Tokef* prayer which tells us that on Rosh Hashana God will open the book of our days and read what is written there. On Rosh Hashana it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...

In between, we have time to look at the book and ask, *Eternal God, Eternal God, what do you see?* Of course in order to know what God will see, we need first to ask what we ourselves will see on the pages of our lives.

The High Holy Day season actually began 4 weeks ago. With the new moon of Elul we are supposed to begin our reflections on the past year and the coming one. On the Shabbat just before Elul, we read a Torah portion called *Re'eh*. It says, in Dt. 11:26, "*Re'eh, See, I set before you today blessing and curse.*" 10 days from now, on Yom Kippur, we will read from Dt. 30 "*Re'eh, See, I have set before you this day life and good, or death and evil.*"

Our holy days are bracketed by this imperative: "*Re'eh.*" See. Now, it could simply be a rhetorical device to get our attention, but our tradition tells us otherwise. Our sages teach that every word of Torah is carefully chosen and laden with meaning; so, what is the purpose of "*Re'eh*" See, as opposed to the familiar "*Shema*" - Hear? At Mount Sinai, immediately after receiving the 10 Commandments, the people "*saw ... the sound of the shofar...*" (Ex 20:14)

How can you see the sound of a shofar?

In his book, Have a Little Faith, Mitch Albom tells a story he heard from his rabbi: "A little girl came home from school with a drawing she'd made in class. She danced into the kitchen, where her mother was preparing dinner. 'Mom, guess what?' she squealed, waving the drawing. Her mother never looked up. 'What?' she said, tending to the pots. 'Guess what?' the child repeated, waving the drawing. 'What?' said the mother, tending to the plates. 'Mom, you're not listening.' 'Sweetie, yes I am.' 'Mom,' the child said, 'you're not listening with your eyes.'"

I think seeing the sound of the shofar, or listening with our eyes refers not so much to the physiology of light refracted through our corneas, but to how we perceive what we see and hear. The Re'eh of this season is telling us to reflect on how we view the things that happen in our lives. The difference between Re'eh, and Sh'ma is that Sh'ma is followed by a declaration: "*Hear Oh Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.*" Re'eh on the other hand, is followed by a choice. "See, I set before you life and good, death and evil." Re'eh tells us that the choice between blessing and curse really begins well before the actual choosing. It begins with how we perceive what is before us.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev once chanced upon a strong, young man who was brazenly eating on Yom Kippur. The Rabbi suggested that perhaps the young man was feeling ill? The fellow insisted he was in the best of health. Perhaps he had forgotten that today was the holy day of fasting? "Who doesn't know that today is Yom Kippur?" responded the young man. Perhaps he was never taught that Jews do not eat on this day? "Every child knows that Yom Kippur is a fast day, Rabbi!" Whereupon Rabbi Levi Yitzchak raised his eyes heavenward and said, "Master of the Universe, see how wonderful Your people are! Here is a Jew who, despite everything, refuses to tell a lie!"

The Berditchever Rebbe was known for his ability to look at others with a compassionate, understanding and benevolent eye. Do we do the same? Do we give the benefit of the doubt or do we choose to be critical? Do we measure our own motives and actions with the same yardstick we use for others?

Izzy got a new dog and couldn't wait to show him off to his neighbor. When the neighbor came over, Izzy called the dog into the house, bragging about how he was working on training the pup. "Wait till you see this!" The dog came running and looked up at his master adoringly, tail wagging furiously. Izzy pointed to the newspaper on the couch and said, "Fetch."

Immediately, the pooch sat down, the tail stopped wagging, the doggie-smile disappeared; he looked balefully up at his master and said, "Oy, my tail hurts from all that wagging. And that dog food you're feeding me tastes terrible. Its too hot in here. And you're not giving me any treats. I can't remember the last time you took me out for a walk..."

The neighbor was stunned – a talking dog! But Izzy, embarrassed said "Oh, sorry about that, he still gets confused. He thought I said, "Kvetch!"

In his book "Born to Kvetch" Michael Wex writes that "Yiddish is the language of complaint, which is rooted in the millennia of Jewish exile. Exile without complaint is tourism." No longer in exile, it can't hurt us to go back to choosing a more positive outlook on life. Irving Berlin, strongly influenced by his Jewish background, sang "when I am worried and I can't sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep. And I fall asleep, counting my blessings." I suppose it's easy to count your blessings when you are a wildly successful songwriter. But Berlin, who is my new hero, truly believed that "life is 10% what you make it and 90% how you take it."

Basketball legend Michael Jordan has said, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 hundred games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." In the coming year, how will we look at our successes and failures? Will we lament our losses or count our blessings? Will we be kvetches in exile or tourists enjoying the journey?

My physics professor in college brought a mayonnaise jar to class one day. He filled it to the top with ping pong balls, and asked us if it was full. Naturally, we said yes. He then took a bag of sand, and emptied it into the jar. How about now, he asked. Full now. Definitely. Finally, he took his coffee cup, and emptied it into the jar. I'm not sure what physics lesson he was trying to get across, but I do remember what I learned. Whether a jar is full or not is less a matter of fact than of perception.

There is often nothing we can do about the facts in our lives. The situations we find ourselves in are often out of our control. How we perceive those situations, and how we respond to them, though, is our choice. Our Torah is advising us to see blessing, and choose good. I can imagine a bumper sticker:

Start *SEEING* Blessings

If there was one place where blessing was hard to see it would have been in the concentration camps. Dr. Victor Frankl, a survivor of Dachau, Theresensdat, and Auschwitz wrote "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom... Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

From his experiences in the camps Frankl came to believe that the only people capable of surviving were those who could see meaning in what was happening to them. His renowned book, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” published in 1946, was originally called “Saying Yes to Life in Spite Of Everything...”

Re’eh...See, I set before you life and good, death and evil... Choose how you will look at life, so you may live. I know it isn’t always easy to see the blessing.

Especially when your feelings are painting a different picture. When you are sad or anxious or angry, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to will yourself to change that emotion. I have come to believe that we can’t choose our feelings. What we can choose is how we will respond to our feelings, what we will do with them. In the end, that is what will matter. The 13th century Sefer Ha-Hinukh teaches that actions shape character. In other words, we are influenced by our own choices; our actions can even reshape our perception of the situation.

I have been thinking about Mahatma Gandhi’s call to “Be the change you want to see in the world.” But I think that is the second step. First, I think, we need to be able to see the change we want to *be* in the world. When our eyes are filled the problems facing the world today, can we envision being the change? Will we be overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems or will we recognize the impact a single act of goodness can have? Will we be blinded by despair, or will we see an opportunity to make a difference?

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Akiva asserts: *Hakol Tzafui Vhar’shut n’tunah*: All is foreseen and free will is given. This is not as paradoxical as it first sounds. All is foreseen: God presents us with a view of both sides of any situation, the positive and the negative, the blessing and the curse – but we have the free will to choose which we will pursue. And that is the gift of being human. Of all God’s creatures we are the only ones made in the divine image, the only ones given the ability, and the mandate, to choose.

Tomorrow morning at the early service, will read B'reshit, the account of creation, and at the late service we read the Akeda, the story of the binding of Isaac. In both these portions, seeing is key. You'll have to come tomorrow to find out how.

Our days on this earth are filled with blessing and curse, opportunity and challenge, triumph and disappointment. While we are certainly constrained by the circumstances of our lives, at the end of the day it is up to each one of us to choose how we will see the world, and how we will live in it.

In this New Year O God, help us to see meaning and good, to choose gratitude and hope, and so bring blessing to our lives, our loved ones, our community, and our world.