

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU LOOK AT

Rabbi Esther Adler

Yom Kippur 5775

Mount Zion Temple

During the summer, when folks are taking more road trips, the DVS runs a variety of driver safety campaigns. One slogan that I see a lot on bumper stickers and billboards says "Start Seeing Motorcycles." *Start* seeing motorcycles? I didn't know I *wasn't* seeing motorcycles.

But of course, that's the point. They are not asking us just to see with our eyes, but to pay attention; to notice the motorcyclist on the road and to give him safe passage; to care enough to not cut her off when changing lanes. To start REALLY SEEing them, no matter how we may feel about them.

Another ad in this campaign is a TV commercial where a driver appears to be driving carefully enough, but in a voice-over we hear her train of thought. She's thinking about work, about dinner, about errands she needs to do, as she casually looks in the rearview mirror and puts on her turn signal. Meanwhile behind her we hear a motorcyclist thinking "I hope she sees me. Please see me. Oh no. She's turning. OH NO! Hey!!! Look!" and so on until the moment when they crash. "Distracted driving is unsafe, irresponsible and ...its consequences can be devastating" says the DVS.

This is not a public service message about motorcycles, or even about distracted driving. It is about seeing. Paying attention. It is a public service message about distracted living. The motorcyclist in the TV ad feels invisible; the driver is oblivious. The result is disastrous.

Have you ever found yourself in either of those positions? I have. I have felt invisible, and it hurts. And I have had my oblivious moments too, and probably hurt someone – maybe it was you – by not noticing or paying attention to you. Please forgive me.

I was at the checkout in the supermarket the other day with a cart piled VERY high (I don't get to the market very often). I was next in line and beginning to unload my groceries, when a woman got in line behind me with one bottle of pop. Luckily I happened to turn around and see her, so I told her to go on ahead. She was surprised, and I got the feeling she had fully expected to be invisible.

The consequences wouldn't have been devastating if she had had to wait; distracted shopping is not nearly as dangerous as distracted driving. But moving through our lives oblivious to others *is* irresponsible, and can truly have devastating consequences that we never even know about.

So my new slogan, at least for the next 10 minutes is “Start seeing...*fill-in-the-blank*.” Let’s go back to the motorcycle for a minute. A motorcycle is smaller than a car, less powerful, more vulnerable. Motorcycles are a minority on the roads – only 3% of registered vehicles.

Who else don’t we see that is less powerful, more vulnerable, and smaller than ourselves? Who else don’t we see that are minorities on the roadways of our lives?

In a New York Times article, Psychologist Dr. Daniel Goleman writes: “Turning a blind eye... Looking down on people. Seeing right through them. These metaphors... are more than just descriptive. They suggest, to a surprisingly accurate extent, the social distance between those with greater power and those with less... This tuning out has been observed, for instance, with strangers in a mere five-minute get-acquainted session, where the more powerful person shows fewer signs of paying attention like nodding or laughing. Paying attention...he notes, “is a prerequisite to empathy, which in turn can lead to understanding, concern and, if the circumstances are right, compassionate action.”¹

So, on this Yom Kippur day, I encourage you to ask yourself, “Am I paying attention? Am I really seeing the people in my life that might have a little less power?”

In the Harry Potter books and movies, House Elves are small magical creatures dressed in rags, who are completely subservient to their masters. Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione have been at Hogwarts for years before they discover that there are actually over a hundred house elves cooking and cleaning, doing their laundry and all the other chores that the wizards don’t want to do. It’s as if they are invisible and Hermione is mortified.

“There are house elves here?” she says, staring, horror-struck . . . “Here at Hogwarts? I’ve never seen one!”

“Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?” answers Sir Nick. “They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning . . . see to the fires and so on . . . I mean, you’re not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there?”²

Think about all the people who help make our lives easier – the ones who serve us our coffee, deliver our mail, dry clean our suits – are we treating them as house elves, or as real people who deserve to be seen? Think about the people you love: are you really seeing them, or have they become part of the household furniture?

1 New York Times, October 5, 2013

2 Rowling, J.K., Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. New York: Scholastic. 2000

An old snake went to his doctor and told him, "Doc, I think I need something for my eyes. I don't seem to see very well nowadays."
The doctor fixed him up with a pair of glasses and told him to return in a couple of weeks for a check-up.
When he returned two weeks later, the doctor asked him how his vision was since he had the new glasses.
"Great," replied the snake. "Only problem is, now I'm very depressed."
"Why are you depressed?" asked the doctor. "Didn't the glasses help?"
"Oh, the glasses are great, doc," replied the snake. "The problem is, when I got home with them, I realized I've been sleeping with a garden hose for the past couple of years."

At home, do you really see your spouse, your children, your parents? Or are you distracted by chores, work, or electronics? Do you see your neighbors? Why hasn't the lady next door been tending her garden lately? Have you noticed that your daughter's best friend has gotten way too thin?

At work, do you see that your colleague just can't keep up, and have you offered to help? Do you see that your supervisor seems more stressed lately and remember that she is a whole person, not just a boss? What about the guy from the copy center, or the security officer who scans your badge? What are their names? Do they have children?

Here at Mount Zion, do you see the person with the walker who needs a little extra space or time to get to her seat or the sweets table? Have you had a conversation with her? Does he need a hand? Do you see the person standing alone at the Oneg? The worshipper who doesn't know what page we are on? How about the people who stand up for the Mi sheberach or the Mourners' Kaddish? Do you look at them or do you see them? Do you see their pain? Do you reach out?

Sometimes, it is a matter of noticing that someone *isn't* there. Many years ago I missed a dinner gathering of my Chavurah group. Nobody called to ask why I wasn't there. If they had, they would have discovered that I was at the emergency room having a miscarriage. I felt hurt, invisible, and alone; I still remember it so clearly. And yet, recently I had to apologize to a member of MZ for not noticing that she had been absent from services for a couple of months. Chatati. She was kind enough to forgive me.

Another group of people we tend to have blind spots about are those who are "other:" Other because they are so different from us in color, religion, socio-economic status, politics, or geography that it is hard to identify with them at all. History has proven again and again that this kind of blind spot – blindness to the shared humanity of another – is dangerous, even lethal. Paying attention, on the other hand, as Goleman says, can enable "empathy, which in

turn can lead to understanding, concern and, if the circumstances are right, compassionate action.”

I was driving recently with my daughter, and as we turned the corner from I94 onto Snelling, there was a man holding a “homeless” sign, and waving at people. Since today is a day for confessions, I will tell you I averted my eyes. But Rosie, God bless her, said “He’s waving at us!” and she smiled and waved back at him. From now on, I am going to stop averting my eyes, make a point of seeing him, and keep some cash at hand to help him out. I know that giving cash to roadside beggars is a sticky issue, but it’s not my place to judge, and I can’t pretend blindness anymore.

It isn’t easy, and it takes commitment and practice to start seeing people differently. But as Hillel said, “If not now, when?” I like even better the way Marge Sullivan, an 85 year old volunteer at a homeless center put it: “Since we aren’t going to be around forever, if we are going to open our eyes, we had better open them wide and open them quickly.”³

Taking the challenge one step further, is a call to see the humanity even in one’s adversary. In Erich Maria Remarque’s 1929 novel “All Quiet on the Western Front,” the main character Paul describes his experience as he stands guard over a group of Russian soldiers:

“I see their dark forms. Their beards move in the wind. I know nothing of them except that they are prisoners, and that is exactly what troubles me. Their life is obscure...if I could know more of them, what their names are, how they live, what they are waiting for, what their burdens are, then my emotion would have an object and might become sympathy...”⁴

Our sages taught: Who is the hero of heroes?...One who makes an enemy into a friend.⁵ This often requires a different kind of seeing – seeing in our mind’s eye. In her book “From Enemy to Friend,” Rabbi Amy Eilberg suggests imagining your adversary as “a five-year-old child, naturally lovable and vulnerable to failure and to being hurt herself. Imagine her as a baby in her mother’s arms.” Rabbi Eilberg goes on to say that “only if we open our awareness to include such expanded, sacred perspective will we be able to see the other – and ourselves – as the persons we truly are.”⁶

3 Noltner, John, A Peace of my Mind, 2011. page 18

4 Remarque, Erich Maria, All Quiet on the Western Front. Continuum, November 22, 2004, p. 102

5 Avot d’Rabbi Natan 23

6. Eilberg, Amy, From Enemy to Friend, Minneapolis: Orbis Books, page 65

An “expanded, sacred perspective” is a worthy goal for the coming year. Perhaps we can expand it even further to looking past our own expectations to see what is really there, to seeing potential good in any given situation, especially the hard ones, and to seeing the other side of the story. Henry David Thoreau wrote, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”

A few years ago I shared a poem called “A crabby Old Woman Wrote This.” I hope you will allow me to bring it back again. It is a ballad written by a British nurse in 1966, in the voice of a nursing home resident. I invite you to listen to it neither as an indictment of nurses, nor as the only story an elder might tell, but as a reminder that there is always more to a person than meets the eye.

What do you see, [people], what do you see?
What are you thinking when you look at me?
A crabby old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit with faraway eyes,
who dribbles her food and makes no reply,
when you say in a loud voice, "I do wish you'd try",
who seems not to notice the things that you do,
and forever is losing a stocking or shoe.

Is that what you're thinking, is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, you're not looking at me.
I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
as I move at your bidding, as I eat at your will.
I'm a small child of ten, with a father and mother,
with brothers and sisters who love one another.
I'm a young girl of sixteen, with wings on her feet,
dreaming that soon now, a lover she'll meet.

I'm a bride now of twenty, my heart gives me a leap,
remembering the vows that I promised to keep.
At twenty five now, I have young of my own,
who need me to build a secure happy home.

A woman of thirty, my young now grow fast,
bound to each other with ties I pray last.
At forty [my young now have grown and moved on],

but my man stays beside me to see I don't mourn.
At fifty once more babies play round my knee.
Again we know children, my loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me, my husband is gone
I look back at the years and the love I have known.

I'm an old woman now, and nature is cruel,
"Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.
But inside this old body a young girl still dwells
and now and again my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain,
and I'm loving, and living life over again.

I think of the years all too few - gone so fast,
and I accept the stark fact that nothing can last,
but look, open your eyes, open and see
not a crabby old woman, look close -- **see me!**⁷

The sages teach us, "*Da lifne mi atah omed*: Know before whom you stand," to remind us that we stand *always* before God. In all our relationships: with those we love, with strangers, even with adversaries, we stand before the Divine presence. Rabbi Akiva said, "God showed a great love by creating us in the Divine image, and an even greater love in letting us know it."

May this knowledge help us to live with our eyes wide open – open to the divinity in our loved ones, to the humanity in the "other;" open to the blessing all around us, and to the other side of the story; open to take in all the wonder in the world, and to the places that need fixing. May 5775 be a year of clear vision.

7 McCormack, Phyllis, *Nursing Mirror* December 1972