

Sermon for 2nd Day Rosh HaShanah - 5768
By Rabbi Ethan Seidel

I had a troubling realization, last month. It happened, like many of my realizations, as I was riding my bike. I had been meeting with a couple of TI parents downtown to help iron out last minute plans for their child's upcoming bar mitzvah, and I was biking back uptown to shul, up 16th street, on the sidewalk. I was just north of Decatur, around 2 miles south of here. At that point, there's a brief downhill as you go north towards Carter Barron, and I began to pick up a little speed. It's nice going fast on a bike, especially in August in DC.

Anyway, crossing Decatur, picking up a little speed, I could see that at the very next cross street, a car *in* the cross street was sticking its nose into the crosswalk, blocking my path, trying to edge into the 16th street traffic. I saw that I'd have to slow way down, go behind the car, and then hope there was room on the other side of the car, between the car and the curb, for me to slip by and get onto the sidewalk again. The driver was doing nothing wrong - there's no way the car trying to get onto 16th street could see the traffic well enough unless it edged out onto the crosswalk, and into my way.

Anyway, I started to slow down, but I had barely applied the brakes when I saw that the car that was blocking me path, was starting to back up! The driver had spotted me coming towards her and pulled back out of the crosswalk to let me pass.

And that's when I had my troubling realization. I had to admit to myself: this whole little dance with the car going out of its way to let the bike go by - this little dance was not at all unusual. I realized that it's quite common for cars to extend this courtesy to me. It probably doesn't take them more than 10 or 20 seconds - to shift into reverse, to back up a little, to wait for me to pass, then to shift back into drive, and to move back into the crosswalk so as to get a better view, looking for a break into the 16th street traffic. I realized: I had to adjust my image of car drivers. They *don't* all have complete disregard and disdain for bikers. Many will even go out of their way to help bikers. I hadn't seen this before. Well, ok, I *had* seen it, but I hadn't noticed it. Over the years, these multiple kindnesses had not been registering in my brain.

You may remember that a number of years ago, at this time of year, I told a different biking story, the story of a driver who tried to spit at me, because I was, however legally, in his way. Fortunately, that driver was neither physically nor mathematically up to the challenge of hitting an object going 20 miles per hour while he himself was going 30. Though I remained unmarked by his saliva, I *was* marked by the event. It reinforced my tendency to see cars as the enemy.

And how sad is that, when the Rabbi, the very person you've hired to find evidence of God in the world, rushes to make cynical conclusions about human nature. When the Rabbi is open to evidence that the world is all about self-interest, but fails to notice evidence of generosity.

Then, more recently, I had a related revelation. I realized that in my rush to judgment about drivers, I was doing just what I've claimed some of the *media* does. You've heard me rant about this before, how I hate how the media concocts an unholy mixture of negativity and cynicism and celebrities and feel-good sentimental stories. The vast majority of it isn't worth reading, and doesn't reflect reality. Intellectually, I know that. I would never buy a People Magazine, for instance. But the fact is, I'm a sucker for such simplistic trash. If a People magazine happens to be placed next to me in a doctor's waiting room, I devour it. Because, like most of us, I'd like to avoid the complexities of reality, at least for a time. Give me a simple

story, with clear good guys and bad guys - like a football player drowning dogs, say - and I will read every last word of every article. Whereas with a more serious issue, say an article about the increasing number of American kids without health insurance ... well, listen, I'm a busy man - give me a break, who has time to read every single story in the Washington Post? In other words, I see what I want to see.

My drash today is about seeing. I am convinced that nothing is so misleading in this world, as what we actually see. Not that there's a better way to collect evidence about reality. But all our senses our subject to misinterpretation. When we see, or hear, or feel - our underlying attitudes and expectations have the power to pervert, or, conversely, to uplift our understanding.

Here's another example; I may have told you the first part of this story. A number of years ago - I think it was my second visit to Israel, in '95, I remember waiting in one of the many passport control lines at Ben Gurion Airport. All of the sudden, an ultra-Orthodox guy came up out of nowhere and just butted in front of me. My back wasn't even turned!?! I challenged him, but he was indignant - "I was here before you" he claimed. I just shrugged and chalked it up to the insular mind of the ultra-Orthodox - they think they're entitled and everyone else is a sinner.

This year, wouldn't you know it, but the exact same situation occurred at Ben Gurion airport, as our TI trip was leaving Israel. I was in one line, and I had turned my face 90 degrees to speak with at TI'er who was in the line next to mine. When I turned my head back 10 seconds later and faced forwards, a little old lady had butted in front of me. And it wasn't even a long line.

I immediately thought of the previous instance with the hasid, 12 years before. But *this* lady was obviously secular. So, in a flash, I changed my bias - I realized that I'd learned something - it wasn't just hasidim that were selfish and liars - it was Israelis in general. I spent a second or two priding myself on being so openminded, on being less biased against the haredim. But then my eyes lighted on the sign in front of the line I was standing in. It said: "Foreign Passports". Uh-oh. The Israeli Passport lines were to my left. So the little old lady in front of me was probably not even Israeli. OK, maybe she *was* Israeli and held several passports - who knows. But that was the point. Who knows? I had a glimpse of two events in the passport line, and had unthinkingly drawn a grand, nasty, and unfounded conclusion about the population of an entire country. And I complain about the *media* bashing Israel!?

The question I'm wrestling with is - when does *real* seeing take place? And who is it that does such seeing? Is the secular cynic the honest seer? Is the person who sees altruism and goodness and selflessness all around just fooling himself? Is the believer, the person who sees evidence of God, a seer, or is he merely delusional?

I believe that today's Torah reading, the story of the binding of Isaac, has something to say about this.. You'll find it on page 109 of your mahzorim. Page 109.

You may have noticed - I may have mentioned it in previous years - a common hebrew root is repeated many times in this story. It is the root resh-aleph-heh, ra'ah, meaning "to see, look, observe". This root occurs so many times in this story, at every crucial juncture in the story, that it's got to be telling us something. There is something about seeing that is intrinsic to this troubling story.

Let me begin by noting that all three of the place names in this story seem to be related to this hebrew root. Take the most famous place name, the name of the land to which Abraham is

traveling, the name of the eventual location of the Temple mount: the land of Moriah. That's a famous name to us nowadays, Mt. Moriah, but back then, it was an unusual name. Except for this story, it's never mentioned again in the Torah. Given that almost every proper name in the Torah is fraught with meaning, we are asked to wonder: What does it mean, "Moriah"? Well, it could mean the "land of seeing". The letter "mem" is often added to the front of semitic verbs in order to make nouns. You know a lot of examples: the word "mitzvah", for instance, is formed from the verb "tzivah", meaning, not suprisingly, "to command". Or take the word "mahzor" - what we call our High Holiday prayerbook. It comes from the root "hazar", meaning to return or to repeat, since we return and repeat these holidays each year. In Arabic, a mosque is called a masjid, an "m" sound being added to the root for bowing down to produce the name for the place where Muslims bow down.

Anyway, Moriah could have something to do with seeing. Though there is another possibility. Before we get to the "riah" part of the word, we have not just "mem", but also a "vav". It's not "m'riah" but "moriah". Those of you who are a little more advanced in grammar know that the "o" in Moriah could be a sign that the first root letter is a yud. Maybe the land of Moriah is linked to a different, but very similar hebrew root, yud-resh-aleph, meaning "awe", or "fear". Maybe Abraham is about to journey not to the land of seeing, but to the land of fear. Or maybe the land of seeing and the land of awe are one and the same.

Now, maybe you think that this is way too much to read into one ambiguous place name. So take a look at the place names at the *end* of the story. On page 110, at the end of the first paragraph, look at the name Abraham gives to this place in which he almost sacrificed his son. The name given is "Adonai Yireh", literally, "God will see". So maybe linking the name Moriah at the beginning of this story with sight isn't so far-fetched, given that the end of the story is so explicit about linking this place with seeing.

Though, when you think about it, Adonai Yireh seems like an odd choice for a name. I would've thought that Abraham would name this place after what had just happened. I would've expected a place name that expressed thanks that God had seen Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his child, and rewarded Abraham. I would've thought that Abraham would have named the place: "God *saw*" - Adonai *ra'ah*, not Adonai *Yireh*. Why the future tense: God *will* see? Will see *what*?

Before I wrestle with that question, let's just note that the next phrase, the very last in the first paragraph of p. 110 is even more confusing. This phrase is a parenthetical comment of the narrator, who notes that the name Abraham gave for this place, Adonai Yireh, is not so different from what the place is now called. The verse reads: "As it is said to this day, B'har Adonai yay-ra-eh." which might be translated "on the mountain of Adonai, it will be seen. (The last word, yay-ra-eh is the passive form of "to see"). The translation "will provide" is actually also a good translation, as we'll see in a minute, though the tense is still a problem. As with the previous phrase, wouldn't it make more sense for the narrator to have said "On God's mountain it *was* seen", or "it *was* provided"? So why is this phrase *also* in the future tense? *What* will be seen? *What* will be provided? Note how our English translation tries to split the difference, and puts it into the present tense: provideth - I think that's present tense, isn't it?

In order to understand these odd place names at the end of the parasha, we have to look at the central moment of this story. In my opinion, the central moment is *not* when the angel comes down from heaven and says "Abraham, Abraham, don't hurt the boy". That's the most *dramatic* moment in the story, surely. But I'm thinking of a passage, on page 109, in the second paragraph, at the bottom. Isaac has just asked Abraham: "Dad, where is the lamb for the

burnt-offering?” Abraham’s answer is, for me anyway, the center of this story. “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.”

I might even go so far as to call this verse the central verse of Abraham’s life, the verse Abraham has been preparing his whole life to say. Abraham, up to this point, has not been noted for his trust in God. Just the opposite. At the beginning of Abraham’s story, in chapter 12 verse 7 of Breishit, Abraham was promised the land of Israel. However, only three verses later, during a famine in the promised land, Abraham decided not to rely on God’s promise of land, and skeddadled to Egypt. That didn’t turn out so well, what with Pharaoh taking Sarah for himself.

But Abraham didn’t learn from that incident, and he repeated his mistake in chapter 15. God promised Abraham progeny, but Abraham, fearing that Sarah would be forever barren, decided not to rely on God’s promise. So Abraham slept with Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian handmaid. Once again Abraham went to Egypt when he should’ve stayed home.

And then again, in chapter 17, when Ishmael is a young lad, and God told Abraham that Sarah would yet bear a child, did Abraham trust the promise *then*? No way. Abraham replied to God saying: לו ישמעאל יחיה לפניך, meaning, roughly - but what’s wrong the Ishmael? And I could cite a few other examples of Abraham’s doubting nature.

Given his history, to hear Abraham at this crucial moment say to his son: “God will provide”... it’s striking. It’s a powerful moment for me. If *Abraham* has learned to trust in God, well maybe there’s hope for all of us cynics yet. Those of us with minimal trust in God. Those of us with no trust at all in God. Those of us who may come to shul with some regularity, but make most of our life decisions in anxiety and fear. Those of us who see no role at all for belief in our lives. Those of us who do, occasionally, get a sense from God about the direction in which we should move, but who don’t have the guts to persevere.

Note the Hebrew root Abraham uses to say “God will provide”. In the Hebrew, it is: א-להים יראה לו השה, literally “God will see to the lamb”. Who knows what Abraham was thinking at that moment. Was Abraham confident that he wouldn’t have to make the ultimate sacrifice? Maybe Abraham knew that a sacrifice was necessary, but had a sense that the sacrifice required was not going to be as bad as it seemed at first. Maybe was Abraham thinking something like: “I have to learn to trust this voice, this spirit that has never failed me, even when it leads me into situations I’d rather avoid.”

This scene reminds me of a lesson from one of my mentors, Rabbi William Lebeau, who recently retired. One of his dicta was: if you are ready to leave your pulpit, if you’ve got the courage to take an unpopular stand that could lead to your ouster, you will probably not have to leave. You must be ready to give up everything if the times demand it, but the ultimate sacrifice is rarely required. But of course, Rabbi Lebeau’s statement is really not about the Rabbinate at all; it could be applied to most jobs. It could be applied to friendships as well. Who’s got the guts to challenge their employer? Who is the true friend - the one who is only nicey-nice, or the one who occasionally challenges his companion? I have heard your stories over the years - I know how you wrestle with these issues. When *do* you take a stand and risk losing a job, or a friend, and when do you just shut up and make do? Life is not easy, as the Torah makes clear from this Torah reading. But it may not be quite as difficult as you think. Keep your eye out for the ram - God will provide.

Now, I should pause here for a second and acknowledge that, for some of you, this past year has been very bad. No ram appeared at the last minute to make your life easier. Perhaps you lost a job, or a friend, or a relative who died, even, perhaps a close relative. Or you’ve

wrestled with sickness - your own, perhaps, or a loved-one's sickness. For you I have no sure answers - for you this story may not be so powerful. You may wonder: "How come Abraham didn't have to lose out in the end, but I *have* had to." I wish I could promise that an angel will come down out of heaven and make things right, and that a ram would appear to take the place of tragedy. One thing I can promise though - our community will help you through these times. That's something Abraham didn't seem to have. You've got the TI community here for you, taking the angel's place - be sure to look to us in the coming year.

Which leads me back to this story, and the place names at its end. What did Abraham name this place: Adonai Yireh - God will see, or better, God will provide. Yes, Abraham could have named it Adonai Ra'ah, God did provide, but Abraham recognizes that this story is bigger than himself - it's not about a one-time miracle. It's about a sense of trust that took a life time for Abraham to develop. He's summing up his life's learning in this two-word sentence - God will provide.

Note that Abraham is not looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. He knows what it's like to be in the midst of a famine, to be at the mercy of hostile potentates, to live with agonizing disappointment. Abraham is not saying that God has promised him a life of leisure - just the opposite, in fact. God provided the tests. It was Abraham's job to provide the trust. Which, towards the end of his life, in this story, Abraham did.

So what about that last, phrase, in which the narrator tells us that people nowadays say of this place: B'har Adonai Yay-ra-eh. On the mountain of God it will be provided. How do we get to this mountain? Do we have to go to Jerusalem, to the Temple mount, to get provided for? If not, to where should we be journeying?

I think most of us know in which general direction we should be going during the coming year, in order to make ourselves better human beings. But we're not always willing to *admit* that we know. Maybe we've heard that still, small voice egging us on, but the mountain is just too high, too far away. I think of Abraham, at the beginning of this story. He travels three days with little data about the location of this land of Moriah towards which God has directed him.. God *says* that he'll show the place to Abraham, but in the story, we never hear God actually tell Abraham - "There it is, Abraham, that's the mountain." Somehow, Abraham just knows. Take a look, on page 109, at the beginning of the second paragraph. "On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place far off."

I think that's the way it often is, in this life. If you can just lift your eyes off the road for a second, if you've got the presence of mind to look a little farther ahead for a moment, you may well catch a glimpse of your destination. The phrase "lifting up your eyes and seeing" is common in biblical Hebrew - it occurs over 50 times in the Tanach. Whenever I read in the Tanach of someone lifting up their eyes and seeing, it always reminds me that seeing *without* uplifted eyes is not real seeing.

I've been thinking about this with regard to another bicycling experience I've had. Actually you have probably had this experience in a car too. It's the experience of biking through a neighborhood I've seen many times, and noticing something, often something obvious, and interesting, but something I'd overlooked before. On a bike, as in a car, you have to focus most of your concentration on the road, so it's no wonder that you miss stuff. But it's very easy to concentrate *all* your attention on the 20 feet of pavement ahead, and that's a mistake. If you concentrate all your attention on just getting by in the short term, you will never see the place from afar.

Sometimes you do have to focus completely on the short term. Like when you're unicycling through a neighborhood. When you're riding a unicycle, you must be entirely focused on the six feet ahead of you, and you really can't observe the scenery. Even a small rock or bump in the road can knock you flat on your face, if you don't see it. Therefore, trying to sightsee while on a unicycle is just a bad idea. The problem is that even though most of us don't actually ride actual unicycles, we act as if we were. We fixate on the road immediately ahead, and the day-to-day aspects of life overwhelm us, leaving us no energy for far-reaching vision. We forget to look up, and we miss our ultimate destination.

Not that I want to discourage anyone from occasionally picking up the unicycle. Everyone should have that white-knuckle, live-completely-in-the-moment experience now and then. But you shouldn't live your whole life like that, focussed on the pavement, oblivious of God's mountain in the distance. Some of your life should be on the bicycle, trolling around town, looking up, in wonder at God's creation, imagining far-away destinations.

Given the closeness of the Hebrew roots, "ra'ah" meaning "to see", and "yareh", meaning "to fear", and given the way these roots are used in this parasha, I believe that seeing and fearing are meant to be linked. We are being reminded that seeing without a sense of awe is not accurate seeing. Seeing involves more than photons and retinas. It also involves the state of our souls: our ability to trust in God, to experience awe, to sense in which direction our path lies.

I close with a story from our congregational Israel trip this past summer. It was our third day in Israel, and we went down to the Dead Sea. We began with a challenging walk up the snake path to the top of Masada, in intense heat. That day, it was so hot that they closed the path up the mountain at 10AM. We started up just a few minutes before 10. Actually, many of the saner T'ers chose to take the cable car up the mountain. It was beastly hot. And once we made it to the top of Masada, it wasn't any cooler. After Masada, we all went to a Dead Sea resort, where most people stayed for a few hours. But the really insane among us opted for yet another walk in the oppressive heat; the bus took those eight of us about 10 miles north, to Ein Gedi.

Ahh, Ein Gedi. An oasis in the middle of the desert, already praised 3000 years ago in the Song of Songs. The spring, which runs even in the dry season, makes a little creek that runs into the Dead Sea. But before the creek gets there it forms a few bathing pools, and it spawns the most luscious greenery, which contrasts in the most striking way with the surrounding desert. You really have to go there once in your life, and a few of us hardy souls did despite the heat.

Anyway, at the end of that 2nd walk of the day, coming out of the greenery and back into the relentless heat, I was exhausted. I'm not a fast walker, but I *am* pretty steady, even in extreme conditions, and I had been able to offer a good deal of help to others throughout that day. Which felt very good. But now I was tired, and ready for a nice ride back to Jerusalem. As that tiredness sank in, right before we left Ein Gedi, I noticed a butterfly that had lighted on a nearby acacia tree.

Now, I could describe for you that butterfly at Ein Gedi, by giving you a physical description: it was about average size for a butterfly - wings a little over 2 inches long - bright green coloring with a big yellow spot. But that wouldn't begin to describe what I saw - I wouldn't have really captured the experience for you. As I looked at that exotic butterfly, a butterfly like none I could ever see in this country, the whole day made sense to me. I saw the butterfly as a blessing sent by God who knows how much I enjoy His creation. It was a gift from a God who, I sense, enjoys my enjoyment. It was a reward from God for helping his people walk across His land. And of course the acacia tree on which it was perched has its own story. For it

was from acacia wood, the Torah tells us, that the mishkan was built. I didn't see that butterfly as much as felt it - a gift from a faithful God reminding me that if I remember to look for beauty in barren places, it will be provided.

B'har Adonai yay'ra'eh. Still another way to parse that phrase is to put a comma after the first word: B'har, Adonai yay'ra'eh. On the mountain, God will be seen. Now that's a little heretical, in a tradition that doesn't believe that God has a form that can be viewed. And in fact, that trope assigned to that verse make such an interpretation impossible. But the trope came later. All we've really got are the words. On the mountain, God will be seen. You do the hard work of scoping out the mountain from far away, you don't shrink from climbing that mountain, you show a willingness to make a sacrifice of what you hold dear: what is your reward? This parasha says: you will see evidence of the unifying force in our universe. God. As close as you or I can come to seeing God. You will see evidence of meaning in this world, moments that are powerfully, if ambiguously linked with each other, events that move our souls to realize that there is more to this Earth than meets the eye. That's real seeing.

May such seeing be your lot in the coming year.

L'Shanah Tova.