

Hayyei Sarah 5771 Beautiful Pictures

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Shabbat Shalom.

A grandmother was wheeling a baby carriage. Inside was her granddaughter. She was *shepping* wonderful *nahas*, filled with incredible pride, with a wide grin on her face as she made her way down the street. She bumped into a friend who stopped, looked into the carriage, and asked, “Is that your granddaughter?”

“It is,” she smiled in response.

“What a lovely, beautiful baby.”

The grandmother responded, “Thank you, she is beautiful, but if you want to see real beauty, you should see her pictures,” and she proceeded to open up her wallet to show off pictures of her granddaughter.

We live in a world that is filled with pictures. Wherever we look, there are pictures – in our homes, our work places, on billboards and magazines and throughout the internet. As human beings in the 21st century, we are visual creatures; we see images and pictures all the time.

We live in an increasingly photographic period. My new phone takes pictures – my camera still takes pictures. My camera takes videos – my phone takes videos. My video camera takes videos. Many people have GPS devices that take pictures as well, and the list goes on and on.

Often on Shabbat, I’ll see visitors and guests in shul who want to celebrate at Kiddush by taking pictures. Taking pictures has become a default experience of the way we interact with our world. Just yesterday, our first-grader, Ari, performed in his class

play at the Jewish Community Day School. While I was so excited for him to share his line about Shabbat, I was also very focused on the pictures. Where should I sit to get the best picture? When should I start taping so that my battery would not run out? How could I concentrate on shooting the video with one hand and taking stills with the other? Sadly, I was so preoccupied with taking the pictures that I lost some of my focus on the play.

I don't think it's just me – I looked at all the other parents holding their cameras, phones, video cameras – it was the same for them as well. We all see this: a school play, a siddur ceremony or when our children are the Shabbat helper in pre-school through their college graduations and beyond, we are preoccupied with taking the perfect picture. That can make us less than fully present in the actual experience.

Today, pictures are integral to the Internet. We can post our pictures on websites, on Facebook, and spread them throughout the Internet. Often this can be incredibly powerful as we can share pictures with people who are thousands of miles away, building and maintaining connections with those who are separated by physical distance.

But we have also seen how destructive it can be. Pictures taken on the Internet can be spread to hurt people, causing *l'shon hara*, hurtful speech, which can be destructive towards others. Pictures can be used to hurt or insult people; often they can be used as a form of bullying.

I've been thinking about pictures. First of all, we as Jews are blessed to have Shabbat. When maximally observed, Shabbat provides a break from taking pictures. When asked on Shabbat, "Rabbi, can I take a picture of this?," I respond, "Yes, but only if it's a mental picture."

Paradoxically, mental pictures we take on Shabbat are more powerful because they are filled with the nuances that life truly contains and are held in our memories, which are much more textured. The simple two-dimensional reality of a picture can leave us with the surface, not necessarily the feeling, of the moment. Sometimes after Shabbat I will write down some things that occurred on Shabbat so that I can remember those experiences and the emotions associated with them a bit better.

But there is a second and more important limitation to pictures. Pictures convey our external appearance, our outward look. Pictures do not convey the full depth of a human being.

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*, opens with Sarah's death – the core of the *parashah* focuses on ensuring the future by finding the proper wife for Isaac. Avraham orders the senior servant of his household, Eliezer, to go and find that wife in the land of Avraham's birth. Avraham assures him that the Divine Presence will be there to help him accomplish this mission.

So the servant sets out with ten camels. We all know that, in the end, he finds Rivkah, who is the right partner for Isaac. Now he could have brought back a description of her beauty. But that's not enough of a test to determine if it is a *shidduch*, a good match.

Eliezer prays to God and says, "Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels' – let her be the one whom you have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that you have dealt graciously with my master." Genesis 24:13-14.

This is a fascinating text. It doesn't say anything about her appearance, about her beauty, but it is about her *middot*, her values, and her characteristics. Sure enough, Rivkah shows up in the next verse, and she is quite beautiful. She offers a drink to Eliezer and then says “*Gam ligmalekha esh'av ad im-keelu lishtot* – I will also draw water for your camels until they finish drinking.” This is almost exactly the same phrase that we have in the initial prayer that Eliezer offers, except that Rivkah has made it even more gracious and generous. She has added “until they have finished drinking.”

Now, I don't know a lot about camels, but I do know that they drink a lot, and they can store a lot of water. After going across the desert from where Israel is today, all the way across the Fertile Crescent, all the way to the land of Haran, where Iraq is today, a long journey, the camels must have been extraordinarily thirsty. To *schlep* that amount of water for ten camels was an extraordinary act of *hesed*, of love and generosity and giving. This is more than a simple formula Eliezer has offered. This relates who Rivkah is on a deeper level.

Think about it – both Sarah (two weeks ago in *Parshat Lekh Lekha*) and Rebecca are described as beautiful, but only Rivkah behaves in a generous manner. She possesses a *lev tov* – a good and generous heart. (*Pirkei Avot* 2:13)

Later on in the parashah we continue to see Rivkah's *middot*, her values. As Daniel mentioned in his insightful dvar Torah, Rivkah practices hospitality, and she is trusting, ready to journey with Eliezer all the way back to the land of Israel, to meet Isaac. After the trip, she sees him, jumps off her camel and asks about the man who is walking in the field towards her. Eliezer replies that he is his master. So Rivkah takes a veil and covers herself. Isaac's sees this act of modesty as a sign to Isaac that she is in

fact going to be his wife. It also reminds us of the value of *tzniyut*, of modesty. Of course, in our world today we often see the opposite type of behavior – fewer and fewer clothes in many situations. The Torah and Rebecca remind us about the values of modesty and proper dress.

These values of generosity of spirit and of modesty are at the core of who Rebecca is. But had Eliezer simply brought back a description of her, or had he e-mailed a picture from *Haran*, I am not sure that would have sufficed!

The notion that real beauty lies beneath the surface is under assault. Our society and our culture inundate us with images and pictures of our appearance and this becomes the primary lens through which we see others and the world.

The difference between taking a picture and actually seeing someone is similar to the difference between speaking with someone and sending them an e-mail. An e-mail is like a picture, an incomplete snapshot that does not convey enough nuance and subtlety. In addition, the speed of an e-mail and its fast pace (I am not even talking about text messages!) can lead to a poor choice of words and may not convey what we had intended.

Sometimes I'll get a note with a complaint about something and I realize that that small picture or vignette does not portray the entire situation. Very often we find ourselves with pictures literal and metaphoric that can be negative and that don't describe the full depth of the situation.

Looking at this *parashah* and Rebecca's generous behavior towards the camels of a stranger, we are reminded of how we should be generous of spirit. E-mails and pictures are not always the best medium for communication. To really understand someone – to

really have a conversation – to really share positive or negative comments or feedback, we must actually reach out to the person and communicate directly. An e-mail does not convey the same depth of expression and feeling. There is nothing like actually having a face-to-face conversation.

Pictures can tell the story of a thousand words, but actually speaking those thousand words to someone can tell so much more. In our world filled with too much instant communication, snapshots and pictures, we need that same generosity of spirit that Rebecca demonstrated to a stranger and to his camels. We should approach each other with that same spirit of generosity.

We should find moments to have the deeper conversations, the fuller communication, the entire picture – like those we can have on Shabbat, freed from our cameras and other constraints.

With that, we will all be as blessed as Rebecca and Isaac were. After she sees him, Isaac and Rebecca are married, and the Torah states, “*Va-ye’eh’haveha*, and Isaac loved her.” This is the first example of love between two partners in the Torah.

Last week we heard of love between a father and son, Avraham’s love for his son Isaac, but now we learn of the love that can exist between two adults, a love that’s shared within the sacred relationship of a marriage. This is the love that comes out of understanding the full picture of the depth of a human being and who they are.

This is what we should all strive for in the pictures we take, whether literal or mental, and in the communications we author.

Shabbat shalom.