

Parashat Re'eh To Really See

Shabbat Shalom.

While we are celebrating a number of *smahot* – happy occasions this Shabbat, there is also some tension in the air in shul this morning; we are watchfully awaiting Hurricane Irene, billed as the most powerful storm that any of us has experienced. When I turned off my computer before Shabbat it was located off the coast of South Carolina, bearing winds up to 100 miles per hour, traveling at a ground speed of 14 miles per hour and expected here sometime around Sunday evening. I could see the storm, follow its track on Doppler radar, see online images of the devastation it had already caused, and hear eyewitness accounts – all from the safety of my office. I believed what I saw because it was not an abstraction, but something I almost experienced.

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Today's *parashah* opens with a powerful word: *re'eh*, see. It is a common, simple word that occurs in this form – masculine singular imperative – 84 times in the Hebrew Bible. What does it mean here?

Is it simply an attention-getter?

[It does remind me of one of the few words of Spanish I picked up on the New York subways was “*mira, mira*, look, look” – reminding passengers to look through the window or door before switching cars or disembarking.]

So what does *re'eh* mean here in our Torah reading?

Does it really mean see with the eyes?

What would Moses have the people see?

It seems to be an abstraction:

“Re’eh Anokhi notein lifneiknem hayom brakhah u’klalah.”

“Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God, which I command you this day; and a curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Adonai your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have known.” (DT 11:26-28).

The Israelites are faced with a choice. Blessing is there for those who walk in God’s ways; curse for those who follow other gods.

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Tracking Irene, I was thinking about the ways in which I can anticipate what it will bring because I know where it has been and where it is projected to go. Unlike the earthquake that some of us felt earlier in the week, hurricanes can be watched from their birth to their death. We know so much more about natural disasters than was known in biblical times. We understand the forces that come together to make a storm, to intensify it. None of this was known in the past.

In biblical times one couldn’t outrun the storm to spread the news. You could not be warned or evacuated as parts of New York City have been. People may have been more attuned to nature, to the way the wind blows, the moisture it bears, the reactions of animals, but they could not see it.

To the ancient Israelites, God, who controlled the weather, acted rationally, meting out blessings and curses in response to the people’s behavior. It is easy for us, with our scientific instruments, satellite photos, and Doppler radar, to feel superior to those with “simplistic” notions of reward and punishment, to those who did not have the

advantage of our knowledge. But ultimately, though we may be able to evacuate those in the hurricane's path, stock up on batteries and *yahrzeit* candles for light, move our yard furniture indoors, do we really **know** any more than they did? Do we know what purpose hurricanes serve, why they appear, as distinct from how they come together? For all our knowledge, what are we really seeing?

Just as to the Israelites, God held knowledge of the unknown and controlled it, so, too, for many of us, something beyond human understanding – for me, that is ultimately God who controls the unknown or at least, is synonymous with the unknown. We can track storms, hunt down defective DNA, map tectonic plates, but the answer to the real question, what the historian Crane Brinton called the Big Question, the why question is unknowable, just as God is unknown and unknowable. We push back the frontiers of knowledge, but, helpful as that may be, it just drives the fundamental question deeper.

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Let us turn back to those opening verses of today's *parashah*. What does “*re'eh - see*” really mean there?

There is nothing to see in the photographic sense, but seeing in Hebrew can also mean, as it does in English, to understand.

When God creates the universe at the beginning of the Torah, it is all about seeing: “*vayar Elohim* - God saw that all God had created was very good.

“Do you see what I mean?”

Seeing can also convey a positive sense of approval. Seeing can mean recognizing something for good. *Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of the Sages*, (2:13, 14) records two examples of the way that Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai would teach his students values. In

an exercise that seems based on the opening of our *parashah* he would set his five disciples two challenges: “*Tze’u ure’u*, Go out and see what is the good way in life to which a person should cleave?”

Their responses were “a generous eye, a good colleague, a good neighbor, foresight, and a generous heart.”

Think about that for a minute.

What is most important?

His conclusion? “*Ani roeh*, I see the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, [who said a generous heart] more than the words [of the other disciples],” meaning “I think his words are better, I appreciate them more.” Those are the paths to blessing.

The second challenge was: *Tze’u ure’u*, Go out and see what is the bad way in life which a person should avoid?” Again they return with their responses: “an evil eye, an evil colleague, an evil neighbor, borrowing without repaying – whether from a person or from God, and an evil heart.”

His conclusion? “*Ani roeh*, I see the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, who said an evil heart, more than the words [of the other disciples].” We go out into the world each day, we see different things before us, we can look for the blessings or look for the curses.

As Samira delineated in her *d’var Torah*, our *parashah* goes on to illustrate blessings and curses, reminding us that some choices are ours to make. We can choose a life of blessings by making good choices. That does not promise us a life free of curses, of hurricanes, of cancer, but it suggests that blessing comes from controlling those things that we **can** control.

We are told to keep away from idolatry, which in my mind would be all forms of extreme behavior where money and objects, a way of life, becomes so all encompassing that we lose sight of what is truly important. The Torah reading goes on to talk about laws of holiness, about how we mourn, about how we eat, and infusing every day with a basic sense of morality. It teaches us to build a sacred community by taking care of the poor, protecting them so that there is not a permanent underclass, and it continues with concepts like the *shemittah*, the sabbatical year, where the ground lies fallow and debts would be forgiven so that the poor could be taken care of. Finally we are given the laws of the three *aliyot regel*, the pilgrimage festivals when we gather as a community.

All of these laws serve in a classic Jewish sense to provide our lives with structure: with morality, ethics, and meaning, a sense of spirituality that infuses how we behave, and a narrative that helps us pass on those lessons from generation to generation. To really see something is to really understand something. It is to understand and appreciate the good.

We live in “interesting times” which is a blessing and a curse. Our world is filled with good and bad, with blessings and with curses, with opportunities and challenges, with moments of joy and moments of sadness, with victories and great disappointments. The Torah reminds us that we have the power to choose. Each morning we wake up, and while we all are constrained by the circumstances of our lives, by those around us, by our own histories, at the end of the day it is we who can choose how we will act, how we will speak, how we will live.

While we have all been given a world filled with goodness and with evil, with sunny Fridays and stormy Sundays, it is we who have the power of seeing the potential

for good – in each moment, in each time, in each place, and in each *mitzvah* – each commandment which has the potential to redeem the world.

As we worry about Irene, let us not lose sight of the many wonderful moments, the perfect summer days – clear blue skies, a few puffy white clouds – we have enjoyed.

As we make the transition from summer to fall and embark on *Elul*, the last Hebrew month of the year, which begins this Wednesday, may we be able to see all the good in the world and bring even more into it – and may we be safe from the Big Storm.

Shabbat Shalom.