

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



WHAT DO YOU SEE?

R'ei

I was recently at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It felt like a pilgrimage. This was the museum of my youth. I remember going there on school trips, but I mostly remember going there with my mother and my older sister. As a kid, I was interested in the big statues and, of course, the mummies. My Mom and sister went for the French Impressionists, for reasons totally lost on me.

Their favorite was Camille Pissaro (1830-1903). Although they would never admit it, I think it was because he was Jewish. His long white beard made him look like a Chasidic Rebbe, but he was from Spanish-Portuguese descent. I couldn't figure out why they liked those blurry views of Paris streets and unremarkable farmers. That is until I read and began to understand his famous quote: Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.

I wanted that 'blessing'.

This brings me to this week's Torah reading. Moshe Rabbeinu has been reviewing the events of the sojourn in

the MIDBAR, and the key word in his address up til now has been 'listen', SH'MA Yisrael, EIKEV TISHMA'UN, V'HAYA IM SHAMO'AH. But this week's parsha begins: R'EI, 'See'.

Moshe, the great pedagogue, has switched from Auditory teaching techniques to Visual teaching techniques. He insisted that they 'listen' to what has happened and God said, but now demands that they 'look' at what is happening and what will transpire.

This 'looking' is going to be very important later in the Torah reading when he starts to talk about animals and KASHRUT, where the stress is on the visible characteristics of the animals. But there's more to this switch than just the material being addressed. It's a major shift in emphasis.

The Ohr HaChayim makes a powerful observation: Moshe had something else in mind when he said R'EI ANOCHI, "look at me!" Rambam explains in Hilchot Teshuva chapter 5 that every person has the potential to become the equal of Moshe. This is precisely what Moshe meant. He said: "Take a good look at me! Everything that I have accomplished you are able to accomplish for yourselves!"

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l suggests that Moshe is really informing the Jews that they have 'Free Will'. They

can see what they want to see. Choose what you want to 'see'. This sounds very much like Ralph Waldo Emerson: People only see what they are prepared to see.

Moshe had guided their attention until now, but from now on the Jews must keep their own focus. I must record two observations about keeping that focus on the 'good and the blessing'. The first is from Rabbi Dr. Avraham Twerski z"l. He noticed that even wise and scholarly people make terrible choices (- his specific example is smoking). Why? Because 'One's judgment is distorted by what one would like to believe.' Yes, we often see and believe exactly what we would like to see and believe.

The other observation is from the Kedushat Levi. The great Rebbe understood that people have trouble 'seeing' the good for another reason. The verse insists that the choice is being placed before us HAYOM - today. This challenge of choosing correctly is a persistent reality which follows us through life. We are never free from this challenge to make the correct choices. As surely as the Sun rises every morning, we are confronted with challenges, decisions and temptations every day of our lives. We must remain eternally vigilant.

But I really like an observation about this verse based upon a problematic

discrepancy in the structure of our verse. The verse begins with the word R'EI, see. This verb is a command in the singular. However, three words later we have LIFNEICHEM, 'before you' in the plural. Why the sudden shift? Has the audience changed?

The Ohr HaChayim suggested: He used the words R'EI ANOCHI in the singular to remind the people that whatever is perceived by means of the sense of sight is experienced equally by all the people although their perceptions by means of the other four senses may vary.

I think that, perhaps, the situation is very different. The rules to be placed before all the Jews are the same, but the perceptions and inclinations of each individual is different and unique. In other words. The Tiferet Shlomo hints at this reality when he observes that the level of YIR'A, fear and awe of God, is different for each one of us.

Yes, there is only one Torah presented by God to the Jewish nation, but every one of us sees and understands it according to each person's perception, knowledge and experience. It is perfectly fine for different Jews to emphasize different Mitzvot and Midot (character traits). It still remains the same Torah presented by God to the Jewish nation.

It's sort of like the story of Reb Zusia.

Be yourself.

The Kedushat Levi adds, 'See that I place before you this day - People who serve Him are aware that they receive new insights daily and learn things they had not known on the previous day. We may therefore understand the word: HAYOM as "every day", as our sages said: God's largesse shall be in your eyes as if something brand new each day.

With the Kedushat Levi's point in mind, I must make one more critical personal observation. Each individual must see each day personally. My day is different from your day. You have a party later today; I have a meeting at my bank. You have tickets to the big game; I have a scary doctor's appointment.

The day looks objectively the same for each one of us, but, subjectively, some see the clouds, others see the blue sky. In spite of all my baggage, I am commanded to see each day as an opportunity to receive God's blessing, if only I heed this warning. The S'fat Emet says that deep within each Jew is the inherent ability to discern and choose only the blessing, unaffected by the physical world's pull.

Listen to Moshe, make everyday the best it can be. It is, indeed, up to you.

