

I See Youⁱ

A Sermon for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah

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Shanah Tovah

This past winter, I had the pleasure of visiting Disney World's Pandora in Animal Kingdom. It brings James Cameron's movie *Avatar* to life complete with "bioluminescent" plants and floating islands. The whole area is magical. But what I most appreciated was the greeting, repeated throughout the area, *Oel Ng-ati Kam-eie*. In Navi, the language of fictional Pandora, it means, "I see you."

"I see you." What a powerful message. What a difficult one. For there are so many people we don't really see.

Some are those closest to us, our siblings and parents, our spouse and kids, our other relatives. How well do we really see them? Do assumptions, frustrations cloud our ability to see, with compassion as well as with honesty, the totality of who they are? Are we just too busy to see them? A recent TV ad shows a little boy recounting his day as his parents half listen, their eyes glued to their screens. It is hard to really see someone if we don't actually look at the person or give him or her our full attention.

The phrase "I see you" is actually a common greeting throughout South Africa, not in Navi, of course, but in Zulu, *Sawu-bona*. It means, "I see your personality. I see your humanity. I see your dignity and respect."ⁱⁱ

Don't we all want and need to be seen in a way that recognizes our individuality, our inherent, we might say God given, right to be treated with dignity and respect? Don't we all deserve to be seen in this way?

Our ancient Rabbis answer, “Yes!” God created the first human being, Adam, *b'tzelem Elo-him*, in God's image, to teach that each human being is endowed with a Divine spark of sanctity that makes each equally deserving of dignity and respect.ⁱⁱⁱ Our ancient Rabbis further taught that humanity was created from one person, Adam, so no one can say, my ancestor is better than yours.^{iv}

How well *do* we see others? So many are invisible to us. The homeless. The handicapped. The elderly. Those who, despite low pay and low prestige, do their best to keep our offices, homes and hotel rooms clean, who work behind a counter or behind the scenes to make our lives more comfortable.

The story is told that, during a visit to the NASA Space Center in 1962, President John F. Kennedy noticed a janitor carrying a broom. He walked over to the man and said, “Hi, I'm Jack Kennedy. What are you doing?” ‘Well, Mr. President,’ the janitor responded, ‘I'm helping put a man on the moon.’ Business author John Nemo comments, “To most people, this janitor was just cleaning the building. But in the larger picture unfolding around him, he was helping to make history.”^v President Kennedy understood that and honored the janitor with his attention, recognizing him as an important team member of their shared heroic undertaking.

We can see people the way President Kennedy did by taking a few moments of our time to greet those who help us and treat them like an important member of the team, which they are. That is particularly true of all our Beth Shalom staff and volunteers. They work so hard arranging our services and supporting Beth Shalom. When you see them, please introduce yourself and thank them for their service. When you see folks here you do not know, today or throughout the year, introduce yourself and get to know them a little. In this way, you let them know you see them.

It doesn't matter if someone is Jewish or not Jewish, white, black, brown, or blue, like the Navi of the movie *Avatar*. We all want to be seen for who we are, to be recognized for being an important part of our

shared human family, to be treated with respect regardless of our differences in race, faith, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, class status, job status, legal status, or any other identifier by which we distinguish each other. This is more than a question of courtesy, though courtesy is important, particularly when it is all too lacking in society today. But courtesy, by itself, is insufficient if we do not also support the kinds of policies that show people respect, like ensuring a living wage, affordable housing, and decent health care for all our neighbors here in Howard County, and across our state and nation.^{vi} Our Torah teaches, *v'ahavta l'rei-cha k'mo-cha, You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, which means what we expect for ourselves, God expects us to provide, or help provide, to others.^{vii}

There is another challenge to truly being able to say “I see you.” We can get so wrapped up in our own pain and grief, fears and anger, even our own exhaustion, that we only look inward and thus miss seeing the same feelings in others. If we cannot see what pains another, we have not really seen that person at all. If we don't see that person, it is very hard to feel empathy or act with compassion. That is especially true when our needs or desires conflict, as in our Torah reading this morning.

Mother Sarah knows what it is like to be a stranger in a strange land. Yet she offers no word of commiseration or comfort to Hagar, an Egyptian who is given as a slave to Sarah by Pharaoh. Sarah never discusses with Hagar her decision to give her to Abraham to birth a child Sarah would adopt, following ancient Mesopotamian custom. Hagar, for her part, never shows any compassion for Sarah's grief over her childlessness or for having to share her husband. Just the opposite. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she ridicules Sarah. Each is so caught up in her own pain they cannot see how they both are trapped within similar societal constraints. Abraham, for his part doesn't see either woman. He only gets involved when God insists Abraham follow all that Sarah says and, thus, send Hagar and Ishmael away. The story does not end there. Hagar cannot even see her own son. When their water is depleted, Hagar leaves him to die alone. It is Ishmael's cry, not Hagar's, that God heeds. For his sake, God opens Hagar's eyes to see the well of water before her.

She had been so focused on her own pain and anger, she literally could not see what was right in front of her.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes: "True religion offers to redeem us from loneliness, not by answering our prayers...but by teaching us to *see* our neighbors as ourselves, to be aware of their humanity, their fears and feelings, instead of our own. True religion teaches us not how to win friends but how to be a friend, to be concerned with alleviating the loneliness of others, learning to hear their cry instead of wondering why no one hears ours."

The frightening truth is, even when we look at others, we often don't see them. That is especially true when we look at people who look different than us.

Scientists have discovered that we tend to unconsciously pick up on visual clues of someone's race or ethnicity and, if different than our own, we stop there, unconsciously ignoring visual clues, such as the color of their eyes or shape of their nose, that would help us recognize that person as an individual.^{viii} Scientists call this the Cross-Race Effect. Their studies show that, on a certain level, we really do not see those who are different from us, at least not as individuals.

Perhaps that is why we seem to have a harder time seeing someone else's pain, and responding with empathy, when that person looks different or is different, in some way, from us. Perhaps that is why, during some of the worst episodes of human history, perpetrators and bystanders shared a common, deadly blindness: they did not see the target of their hate as individuals deserving of dignity and respect, let alone empathy and kindness.

We have a hard time seeing the face of our shared humanity in those who we perceive of as different but it is possible, as this story from the dark days of the Holocaust demonstrates.

In April 1945... Brocha Rivka and her four children, along with everyone else in the concentration camp... were herded out of their quarters and forced to go on one of the infamous death marches. Barely

clad, starved, disease ridden, and cold, they marched, not knowing their fate. Many fell to the side of the road, dead. Like so many others, Brocha Rivka became ill...but she continued to march on, knowing what would happen if she stopped. She ...urged her sons and [8 year old] daughter [Chana] to keep walking...Finally, her fever was just too high, and she was too weak to continue... Despite all her efforts, she couldn't...get up...[As her sons encouraged her to rise] little Chana...wander[ed] away... Suddenly, from a far distance, Chana noticed a Nazi soldier running toward her in great haste. She screamed... and all eyes turned toward Chana's direction, terror seizing them as they watched the Nazi hurtling toward beautiful, blond haired, blue eyed Chana

..... Brocha Rivka...began to recite the *Shema ... Hear O Israel...*,the blessing one says [when] death...[is] imminent. The Nazi picked up speed as he raced directly toward little Chana. When he reached her, he stood there in front of her unmoving. Everyone else froze in place. Chana boldly returned his stare...She waited for the Nazi to pull his gun from his holster. She braced herself for the bullet that she knew would come. And yet . . . there was no rage in his face. He did not go for his gun. Instead, he began to weep. "Your hair – it's so blonde. You look exactly like my daughter; you could be her twin... I miss her so much. I didn't want to be part of this killing machine . . .They drafted me... I had no choice."

Everyone watched the Nazi..., unsure of what he would do next. After only a few moments – that seemed like an eternity – the Nazi ...approached Brocha Rivka and her children who stood huddled together in fear. "Take off your Star of David [patches]... and call yourselves Hungarian refugees. Don't follow those people on the march, they are being led to their deaths. Instead, go toward that mountain." He pointed,... adding, "You will find refuge there." Then he planted a kiss on Chana's forehead and said, "Good luck to all of you." ...Stunned by their twist of fortune, they fled to the mountains and found refuge in a barn belonging to an elderly Christian lady. She allowed

them to stay in the barn until the war was over. Against all odds, [Brocha Rivka] and her children ...survived.^{ix}

This is the power of truly seeing someone. By thinking he sees his own beloved daughter, a Nazi comes to see the little girl actually standing before him as an individual worthy of compassion rather than as part of an indistinguishable mass he has been taught to hate and kill. His vision broadens to see her mother and brothers also as individuals, also worthy of his help.

How well do *we* see? Do we see the agony of the undocumented immigrant who crosses our Southern border with her child in an effort to escape who knows what horrors only to be separated from the very child she sought to protect? Do we see the anxiety of the young student in Baltimore who worries that his undocumented immigrant parents will be arrested by ICE before he gets home in the afternoon? Do we see the desperation of the families fleeing war and famine in Africa and the Middle East, who are trapped in refugee camps without adequate food, water or medical care? ^x Who do we clump together as part of an indistinguishable mass and thus justify to ourselves that it is not our concern if they are not treated with the same dignity and respect we expect for ourselves?

One of our greatest sages, Hillel, taught over 2000 years ago, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”^{xi} We are a People whose history reminds us what it is like to be stateless refugees, persecuted and unwanted strangers. All our families were once immigrants who sought to make a better life in the US for their children, for us. Our parents, grandparents, great grandparents wanted to be seen as individuals, worthy of dignity and respect, and wanted the chance to make their contribution to their new land. “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” According to Hillel, this is the *essence* of all of Judaism. How, then, do we deny others that same chance, that same right, that we so desperately sought over the generations, to be truly seen as individuals and be treated with the dignity and respect all human beings deserve?

How well *do* we actually see others? And if we do see another, what are we required to do on their behalf? The answer is found in our Torah, in the Book of Exodus: *It happened in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens...*^{xii} Moses was a prince of Egypt. He did not have to get involved. But once he *saw* the suffering of the people before him, he knew he had to help them. Thus, Moses began a journey that led him, and our People, not only from slavery to freedom but to our historic mission to be a light unto the nations, the ethical conscience of the world. The ability to see each individual is part of that charge.

The phrase, “I see you,” at least in the movie *Avatar*, marks the main character’s journey from insensitive tough guy to someone who sees, and becomes committed to protecting, the shared “humanity” of those very different than himself. In that way, his journey is a little like that of Moses. Maybe it is also our journey, our shared heroic undertaking. We are all descended from the same single human, Adam, which means we are all brothers and sisters created with the inherent worth of God’s image within us. Each day God calls upon us to shake off our blinders and truly see each other.

“I see you” are three little but powerful words that can help us transform our families, our communities, our country, and our world. In the year to come, may they inspire us to repair our relationships, strengthen our communities and help our nation rise to the tasks of healing a broken world. And let us say, Amen.

Shanah Tovah

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ⁱⁱ Glen Pearson, African Famine: "I See You" The Blog, 08/09/2011 *Huffington Post*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/glen-pearson/africa-famine_b_922063.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gen. 1:27, Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:4, Cf. Babylonian Talmud 20a-b.

^{iv} Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.

^v John Nemo, “What a NASA Janitor Can Teach Us About Living a Bigger Life,” *The Business Journals* Dec 23, 2014, 1:58pm <https://www.bizjournals.com/bizjournals/how-to/growth-strategies/2014/12/what-a-nasa-janitor-can-teach-us.html>.

^{vi} The Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) has passed several teshuvot on these issues. E.g., Rabbi Jill Jacobs, "Work, Workers and the Jewish Owner," CJLS:2008, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/jacobs-living-wage.pdf>, and Rabbi Michael Knopf, "The Legal Responsibility of Jewish Hotel Patrons," CJLS: 2014 <https://mikeknopf.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/the-legal-responsibility-of-jewish-hotel-patrons-cjls-teshuvah-version-10-13-2014.pdf>, and respective concurring opinions.

^{vii} Lev. 9:18.

^{viii} Kathleen L. Hourihan, Aaron S. Benjamin, and Xiping Liu: "A Cross-Race Effect in Metamemory: Predictions of Face Recognition are More Accurate for Members of Our Own Race," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 1:3 (September 2012): 158-162. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3496291/>.

^{ix} Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, *Small Miracles of the Holocaust* (2008): 92 – 95.

^x Zack Beauchamp, "9 Maps and Charts that Explain the Global Refugee Crisis." *VOX*, Jan 30, 2017 <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/1/30/14432500/refugee-crisis-trump-muslim-ban-maps-charts>; Oliva Coletta, "Refugee Camps: Poor Living Conditions and their Effects on Mental Health," *Refugee Mental Health Blog, Duke University, March 27, 2018*. <https://sites.duke.edu/refugeementalhealth/2018/03/27/refugee-camps-poor-living-conditions-and-their-effects-on-mental-health/>

^{xi} Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a.

^{xii} Exodus 2:11.