



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Shemot: Eyes Wide Open

At the start of Shemot we meet the person – Moshe – who will become perhaps the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Reading the verses that depict his earliest experiences, we look for the ingredients that gave Moshe his formidable potential for leadership. What made him so special? This year I noticed a recurrent theme, more accurately, a repeated verb. It relates to Moshe's sight:

יא ויהי בימים ההם, ויגדל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא, בְּסַבְלֹתָם;

וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי, מִכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו.

יב וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ

...When Moshe had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and **saw** their labors. He **saw** an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. ¹²He turned this way and that and **saw** no one about.

Years later, at the burning bush, Moshe again stops to “see”; the verb ראה “see” reappears several times. This “seeing” attracts God’s attention:

וַיֵּרָא, וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעַר בְּאֵשׁ, וְהַסֵּנֶה, אֵינּוֹ אֶכָּל

ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה--אֲסִרְה-נָא וַאֲרֹאֶה, אֶת-הַמְרֹאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה: מַדּוּעַ, לֹא-יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה.

ד וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה, כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת

He **saw**, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. ³Moshe said, “I must turn aside **to look** at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside **to look** ...

Please discuss these scenes:

- Is Moshe merely alert, curious, observant of his surroundings, or is this “vision” indicative of something deeper?
- If you had “seen” the violent taskmaster, would you have intervened? Moshe “saw no man” to assist or protest. Why was that?
- If you had “seen” the Burning Bush, would it have aroused your curiosity?
- In an era of smartphones, have we lost our ability to “see” past our screens?

As we have noted, Moshe is described as a man with unusual sight, with a propensity for a focused visual sense.

Rashi: “He saw their labors: He put his eyes and heart to experiencing their pain”

וירא בסבלתם: נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם

Rashi suggests that when Moshe witnesses his fellow Israelites in slavery, it is not as a dispassionate spectator. He experiences empathy, he feels their pain. This is evidenced by his extreme reaction, lashing out at an Egyptian taskmaster and killing him. I would go even a stage further. Moshe’s emotional connection leads to a response; his outrage becomes a call to action.

And I would ask this question: Does Moshe begin to feel emotion as a result of what he witnessed? Or might we say that because Moshe “opened his eyes and heart to experience their pain” he now “saw” the world in a different way?

At the Burning Bush, the strange sight arouses Moshe's curiosity. Is he fascinated by nature, or does he sense a potent spiritual potential in this unnatural spectacle? Moshe is an active watcher, perceptive, experiencing events around him deeply. He sees the bush burning but he wants to watch “this marvellous sight.” The supernatural beckons him. Here we witness a certain spiritual inclination or aptitude.

Where does Moshe develop this gift of vision? From where does it originate?

Many have commented that the verb רָאָה may be found earlier in the Moshe narrative.

First it is seen with his mother, Yocheved. When Moshe is born: “She saw that he was good - וַיֵּרָא אֶת־כִּי־טוֹב הוּא - וַיִּתְּרָא אֹתוֹ”. What is this “goodness” that Moshe’s mother sees in a new-born infant? Every mother loves her child! We might suggest that in bleak times, when children were being slaughtered, she believed that this child had a future, that this boy would indeed survive. She exhibited a particular faith and a steadfast determination to ensure that this child would have a future. Could this “vision” not have had a deep influence upon Moshe?

The second “see-er” is Moshe’s savior and adopted mother, Pharaoh’s daughter. She also “sees”:

וַתֵּרָא אֶת-הַתְּבֵה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף, וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אִמְתָּהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ. וַיִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרָאֶה אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד

She **saw** the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. ⁶When she opened it, she **saw** that it was a child

We see her curiosity as she spots a strange basket lodged in-between the reeds. She examines its contents and is moved by pure human emotion and vows to keep this child alive. For a daughter of Pharaoh, this speaks volumes. She is undermining her own father’s policy. It seems that she is willing to engage in her own small protest against his infanticide by harboring and raising this Hebrew babe. Her seeing is indicative of her humanity, her moral activism, and her willingness to pay a high personal price for her compassion. Again, how could this woman’s “vision” not affect and influence Moshe!

So, if we may summarize, the key to Moshe’s great beginnings is his ability to open his mind and heart to injustice, to seeing the suffering of others, to cultivate a spiritual mindfulness and awareness, experiencing the divine in the world we inhabit. And as a friend put it to me, once we begin to see a perspective of this kind, we cannot “un-see” it; it is present, and it warrants a response. Moshe challenges us to tune our hearts and minds so that our eyes register and our souls engage with events which we experience. True leaderships begins with “seeing” in the deepest sense of the word.

Shabbat Shalom!

¹ Interestingly, Midrash imagines Abraham as witnessing a “palace in flames” and he calls out for the owner of the palace and finds God. This is a midrashic corollary to the Burning-Bush story. Abraham seeks and discovers God amidst the burning.