

I was having a conversation recently with someone in the congregation about the difference between seeing and listening. We talked about how each one of these senses affects the other and what happens to one when we lose the other. Some of us may know people who lose their vision and depend more on their hearing and of course people who can no longer hear, who depend more on their vision to help them learn about their surroundings. I know people who have lost their vision and others who have lost their hearing and I am not sure which is more challenging.

Over these holidays, we will spend a great deal of time focusing on hearing and listening – after all that is what most of our rituals are about on the High Holidays; hearing our prayers, listening to our new Cantor sing the melodies and joining with others to feel the connection to our sacred words, our communal experience and our themes of these special days. Tomorrow morning, we will be woken again to the sound of the Shofar, the clarion call that reminds us to return to the proper way, a series of cries and sounds, blasts from the Ram's horn to remind us of the ram that Abraham found in the thicket in the story of the Binding of Isaac.

With all of this emphasis on hearing and listening, tonight I want us to focus a bit more on seeing, on vision – both what we choose to see and on what we choose not to see. And the vision I am describing is not only something we do with our eyes, but also vision in our hearts as it implies our understanding, our acceptance, our compassion and our love.

Every single morning, we Jews focus on our vision. It is amongst the first blessings we say every day. Thank you, God for allowing me to wake up again to this new day and for allowing me to see – *Baruch Ata Melech HaOlam, Pokeach Ivrim* – God You are the one who opens the eyes of those who have no vision.

In the Midrash, Rabbi Binyamin writes, “We are all blind until God opens our eyes.” *Hakol b'chezkat sumin ad sh' Hakadosh Baruch Hu Me'ir et Einehem.* As we enter the High Holy Days this evening, I want us to focus on what this means. How does God open our eyes, how we can encounter something new and truly see it or how we can recreate a common experience - but this time see it differently, see it fresh and anew, with our hearts perhaps open a bit more, ready to be touched, ready to respond, ready to see with a new perspective. We all know about blind spots when we are driving, parts of our vision that take extra effort to notice – how can we metaphorically eliminate as many of those blind spots in life as possible?

To do so, we need to look inward, to see our actions of the past through the lens of Teshuva, the process of self-introspection, self-evaluation, deciding what went well in the past and what needs a change in the future. But then our gaze turns outward, to the people around us, the people with whom we live and with whom we work, the people we encounter in different parts of our daily lives and as we see them, we evaluate them, too often we judge them, we strive to understand them and at times we just do not get it right.

All human beings suffer from the same malady called “inattentional blindness.” The American Psychological Association defines inattentional blindness as when a person cannot see unexpected things that appear within their visual field. Some say this phenomenon is believed to be a side-effect of excessive stimuli and can cause a person to miss important items in their field of vision, especially if they are unexpected. This term was first coined by Arien Mack and Irvin Rock in 1992 and is the title of their book published by the MIT Press, *Inattentional Blindness*.

Scientific research appropriately calls inattentional blindness a phenomenon--a scientific, neutral term. As a Rabbi with a sermon agenda, as someone who strives to help us see things we may not have noticed before, I am suggesting that we think more about our own inattentional blindness. This is a problem that we need to address, in a more substantial way. Perhaps we'll never completely cure inattentional blindness, but we can certainly try to reduce its effects. We can certainly try to reduce our blind spots. We can certainly strive to improve our vision of ourselves and of others. As Rabbi Binyamin wrote in that Midrash, “We are all blind until God opens up our eyes.”

We will see over the next two days in our Rosh Hashanah Torah readings. The reading on both days is one continuous story that describe incidents of inattentional blindness, stories of the first Jewish family, the story of Abraham and Sara, Isaac, Ishmael and Hagar. These are complicated stories about family strife, about egos and personal sacrifice, stories about how people sometimes do not see the things right in front of them.

Tomorrow, we will read how Abraham banishes his son Ishmael and Ishmael's mother Hagar from his home to wander through the desert with very little food and water. Hagar is watching her son Ishmael dying of thirst and, in the first recorded prayer for healing recited on behalf of someone else, Hagar cries out to God. At the last possible moment, an angel of God calls out to Hagar, and tells her that God has heard the cries of the child. And the Torah writes, "God opened up Hagar's eyes, and she saw the well of water." *Vayifkach Elohim et Eineha Vatarei Be'er Mayim*. God opens up her eyes. It seems that the well was there in Hagar's field of vision all along, but she was blind to it. Hagar was appropriately focused on her son. Hagar was emotionally overstimulated by the challenges that were her main focus and so she was unable to see the well, an unexpected blessing in her field of vision. To overcome her inattentional blindness, she needed a personal crisis and an interaction with the Divine. God opened Hagar's eyes, she saw the well, and she and Ishmael were saved. Like Hagar, we too may be blind to blessings all around us, we may not see the solutions and the opportunities and the responsibilities that are right in front of us. Like Hagar, we too may be blind to our potential resources and solutions. Like Hagar, we too have the opportunity right now to work on our vision, to develop our faith, to look out for the unexpected, to discover the hidden blessings. "We are all blind until God opens our eyes."

On the Second day of Rosh Hashanah, we will read *Akedat Yitzhak*, the binding of Isaac, when the Torah describes Abraham's attempt to demonstrate his true devotion to God, how he accepts God's instruction to sacrifice his son. In this chilling story with which we struggle every year, we read about Abraham holding a knife over his son Isaac, preparing to slaughter him. Again, at the last possible moment, an angel of God calls out, "Avraham! Avraham! Don't kill the boy." And then we read how Abraham stops, saves his son and then lifts up his eyes, *Vayisa Avraham et Einav*, and he saw – and behold, there was a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns."

Rams are not small animals nor delicate animals. Hence, the name, 'ram'. Rams like to ram things. It's a little strange to imagine that there could be a live ram caught in the bushes right next to Abraham--and that Abraham never noticed it. Inattentional blindness. If the ram was stuck, we suppose it was stuck for some time. Abraham was seeing with tunnel vision. Abraham was blind until God opened up his eyes. It took a spiritual awakening, a personal challenge, a personal crisis, an interaction with the Divine, to open Abraham's eyes to what was right in front of him. These High Holy Days, we have the opportunity to work on our vision, to develop our understanding and our faith, to see things right in front of us in a new light and with an open heart, to look out for the unexpected, to discover the hidden blessings. We are all blind until God opens up our eyes. Our biblical ancestors suffered from inattentional blindness and too often, so do we.

One of my favorite contemporary stories that makes this point describes an experiment conducted to prove how many of us today suffer from inattentive blindness. A group of researchers hired one of the world's most talented musicians, the violinist Joshua Bell, to play one of the world's best classical musical compositions, Bach, on one of the world's best instrument, a \$3.5 million dollar 300 year old, Stradivarius violin. Here's the catch: instead of playing the music in the expected environment, a concert hall, they dropped him off at a Metro subway station in Washington DC, an unexpected environment during rush hour. They wanted to see if anyone would pay attention to great beauty in an unexpected place. The researchers prepared for all sorts of contingencies in case people recognized that the great concert violinist Joshua Bell was playing in a local subway station. They had police standing by, armed for crowd control, in case there was a mob scene, and mass hysteria set in.

Anyone who has seen this video can see how Bell opened up his case, took out his violin and played for an hour. If you watch the clip on You Tube you will see that 1,096 people passed by. At three minutes, a middle-aged man noticed that there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace, and continued walking. At minute seven, Joshua Bell received his first dollar bill. A woman threw a dollar bill into his case and, without stopping, continued

to walk in stride. At 23 minutes, a 3-year old boy stopped, but his parent tugged him along. The kid escaped the parent's grasp to look at the violinist again, but the parent was persistent and led the child away, his head turned and focused on the violin the whole time. This parent-child scene was repeated several times. After the full hour, a total of six people had stopped and listened for a short while. Twenty people gave money and kept on walking. He collected a total of 32 dollars and 17 cents. Some people had tossed in pennies.

Gene Weingarten of the Washington Post described this experiment by writing, "If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world, playing some of the finest music ever written, with one of the most beautiful instruments ever made...How many other things are we missing as we rush through life?" Inattention blindness.

My friends, it is Erev Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year and the beginning of a sacred ten-day period that requires us to evaluate our lives and pursue new ways to see the world around us. As we begin this process individually and collectively, I want us to work towards reducing our inattention blindness. I want us all to be more conscious of what is around us, to sense things that we may not be able to see only with our eyes; to find opportunity to help others, to respond differently and to truly listen and see, with our ears, our eyes and our hearts.

The Talmud writes, "Blessings are found in that which is hidden from the eye." Consciously expanding our attention is a spiritual act that will fill our lives with unexpected blessing and holiness and opportunity. Let's open our eyes to the hidden blessings. "We are all blind until God opens our eyes."

My prayer for all of us tonight is to ask God, to open up our eyes to the hidden beauty and the infinite possibilities all around us. We praise God's limitless perception and we recognize our limited perception. May these High Holy Days open up our eyes so that we can see people in need and the opportunities to help them. May these High Holy Days open up our eyes so that we can discover hidden resources and invisible blessings all around us, that allow us to be grateful for both what we have and for the opportunities to do more. May these High Holy Days open up our eyes so that we can better sense God's presence and God's challenges.

Kein Yihei Ratzon – So may it be God's will.

Shanah Tovah