

What Are We Not Seeing?

Picture this scenario. I ask you to watch a video of six people passing a basketball around in a circle. Three of them are wearing white shirts and three are wearing black shirts. Your task is to count the number of times people wearing the white shirts pass the ball. Simple task, no?

Meanwhile, while you're busy counting, a person in a gorilla costume strolls across the stage, walking right through the circle of people passing the ball. The gorilla faces the camera, thumps his fists to his chest, and then walks off-stage. The gorilla spent a total of 9 seconds on the screen that you were staring at.

Raise your hand if you assume you would see the gorilla? (right, me too)

Almost everyone presented with this scenario assumes that they'd see the gorilla - likely the moment he walked on the stage. But in reality, half of the people watching the video, focusing on counting the passes, missed the gorilla. It was as if the gorilla was entirely invisible.

When I tried the experiment, I only noticed the gorilla around second 8 - as he was walking off the stage. I literally missed the entire entrance, chest thumping, and almost the entire exit.

Since it's a fun social experiment and has become quite a famous study, I assume some of you are familiar with it. What you might have missed however, was the follow-up study.

The authors of the original study were curious if participants who knew to look for the gorilla would be better at noticing unexpected occurrences. So they ran a similar second test. Participants were shown a very similar video - players throwing a ball around - and given the same task - count the tosses by the players in white shirts. And once again, a gorilla made its way into the scene. About half of the participants who had NOT seen the original video spotted the gorilla (the same result as the first test) and every person who had seen the first video quickly noticed the gorilla.

But that wasn't the real test; instead, the scientists wanted to know if the people who had seen the first experiment had been trained to look for *unexpected events*... or just for a gorilla. To do this, they added two major changes: the stage background color changed midway through, and one of the ballplayers on the black team left the stage.

Of those who knew to look for the gorilla, only 17% noticed *even one* of the two other changes. That means that only about one in every seven people observed a major shift, despite already knowing that another was going to take place. What does it say about them that their scope of

observation was limited to the range of things that they already knew was coming?

Interestingly enough, 23% of those who didn't know what to expect saw not only the gorilla but also one the other events. These people were attuned to the action in a way that showed true attention to detail.

I am deeply concerned that we, as a community and as individuals, spend so much time looking for "gorillas" that we miss many things that are worth our attention. As a group, I fear that we are so attuned to the traumas of our past that we're inured to anything short of a pogrom. Just last Friday night, Temple Sinai was vandalized; just last year, swastikas were found in Sharon high school. Yes, we all have severe cases of outrage fatigue; 5779 has been a difficult year for Jewish communities around the world. But if we are not "seeing" a hate symbol painted on a Jewish star outside a shul in our own town... what else are we not letting ourselves see? And what else can we be doing - as a community and as individuals - to acknowledge the pain felt by others, to help them carry their burdens, without letting it weigh us down?

This morning's Torah and Haftarah readings offer us multiple glimpses at ways in which a person's pain is overlooked. For example, entire books have analyzed Hagar's despair, but what is said of Ishmael, thrown out of the only home he knew and deprived of his home? Or Sarah, forced to confront a daily reminder of her own infertility in the form of another human being? Or even Abraham, whose marital nadir led to a choice between two parts of his family? As you heard the words chanted this morning, did you investigate the people behind the words? What have you been unintentionally ignoring, and how can you participate in the world with your eyes open wide?

As we listened to the Haftarah, did you try to explore those characters whose stories have been "less than" because they are not the focal point? We might consider the shame of Elkanah, unable to provide his wife a child. Or attempt to understand the complexities of Peninah, Hannah's sister-wife, who gives their mutual husband the children that he craves - but knows that she will never be good enough. Even more, as this holiday elevates the notion that having children is the ideal, we need to acknowledge the pain felt by those who may be grappling with their own unmet needs and desires.

We walk through the world to the beat of our own hearts; too often, we ignore others' pain, unconsciously dismissing it as less important than our own. In truth, the pain with which we best sympathize is often the most tragic, because it's the kind we can see. With cancer, there is no ambiguity; with death, no disparity in appropriate response. While the worst grief makes for the most obvious engagement, the person who carries around their struggle in their pocket - as opposed to wearing it on their sleeve - needs support just as badly. But they receive far less of it, and what they do obtain is often inadequate because we do not know how best to meet their needs. We are not at fault for not giving them what they did not request - but we are culpable for not recognizing their burden and asking how we can help them bear it.

What are we missing that could be right in front of our own eyes?

In both today's and tomorrow's Torah readings we see parallel storylines: the protagonist is unable to see what is right in front of them. Today, we heard how Hagar needed an angel to open her eyes in order for her to see the life-saving well of water. Tomorrow, we will hear that an angel calling out to Abraham, right as he was about to sacrifice his son, allowed him to hear a ram caught in a nearby thicket, which he subsequently offers as a

sacrifice in place of Isaac. Both revelatory moments saved a child's life - but it took divine intervention to snap the parent out of their own grief.

Kind of makes it easier to ask yourself what you might be missing, doesn't it?

All too often we wrap our self-valuation up in our jobs, and crumble when things don't go as we planned or hoped. When we have a bad day at work, we expect the world to apologize or get out of our way; but how often do we notice the same emotions in our friends or colleagues, even as they encounter challenges that rock them to the core?

Our culture doesn't give us time to deal with our emotions-- and further, it asks us to discard them altogether. Bereavement leave is generally reserved for members of your immediate family and lasts only a handful of days. The loss of an extended family member, a close friend, a beloved pet - any of these can throw us into an emotional pit for weeks or months; yet somehow, we are expected to soldier on.

Acknowledging our emotional state is not only an act of kindness to ourselves. It also allows our communities to acknowledge our pain, to say, "I see you" and to support us in the ways that we need to be bolstered.

R. Yosi (in the Talmud) said: All the days of my life I was troubled by this verse: "And you will grope at midday as the blind gropes in the darkness." (Deuteronomy 28:29). What difference does it make to a blind man whether it is dark or light? Until the following incident happened to me: I was once walking on a pitch black night, and I saw a blind person walking on the road, and he had a torch in his hand. And I said to him, My son, why are you carrying this torch? He said to me, As long as this torch is in my hand, people see me and save me from the holes and the thorns and briars.

In a beautiful, non-judgemental way, the man that R. Yosi encountered was able to tell the world what he needed from them - and, presumably, the community rose to the occasion, helping provide the support he needed. By the light of a torch, R. Yosi was able to literally and figuratively see the needs of the person in front of him. It is not always so easy for us to see or be seen.

I want to emphasize and practice this with an opportunity to stand, stretch, and speak. To drive home just how much of a burden we carry in private, I'd like to ask you to spend a few minutes encountering another person in the *kahal*. I invite you to sit and speak with someone who is new to you - or at the very least, who doesn't live in your house.

Start by introducing yourself. Then begin to answer the questions on the source sheet in front of you. I'll let you know when you should move on from introductions to the questions, and then give you each 4 minutes to speak. We'll come back together at the end.

- Think of a moment where you felt deeply understood. What conditions contributed to your feeling truly seen?
- Recall a moment that you were made aware of something you hadn't seen before? How did you feel? What had been the block and what allowed you to see what you couldn't before?
- When do you see your loved ones most clearly? When are you seen most clearly?

- What gets in the way of you not seeing others or being seen for your true self?
- How do we reproduce the conditions that produced positive outcomes?

[spend a few minutes sharing what we've learned - what are the conditions that are needed to see and be seen]

Wrap-up

I want to paint a picture for you of what this morning's Torah reading could have looked like.

What if, when Sarah approached Hagar about giving Abraham a son, they had a deep conversation in which they shared their feelings and fears?

What if Sarah had said to Hagar, "I feel inadequate, unable to give my husband a son - but I'm also afraid of what it will do to our family structure, my relationship with you, my relationship to this baby, and my relationship

to Abraham.” And imagine how the scenario could have played out differently, if Hagar had replied, “I know. I see you. I too am afraid. You are in the position of power here and I don’t know my role. I love you and I love Abraham and I don’t want to come between you.”

Probably not tense enough to be in the Torah... but no less powerful for it. Think about how you can open yourself up, both to seeing others and letting your true self be seen this year. It may not be the quick fix for world peace, but it very well may be a key to a happier, healthier year.

Shana Tovah.