

The Well of Compassion

Reflections on the Art of Spiritual Care

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8 Sight

Being seen can help the soul blossom, especially during crisis. Not being seen can cause the soul to wither. Sight is reflection. Reflection happens in nature when the sun sprinkles diamond-like sparkles across the sea. The shimmering diamonds illuminate the possibility of wonder. The full moon's reflection is like a path of melted gold on the dark waters. Beholding the changes from night to day and day to night invokes deep wonder. The hot pink sunset and the golden/purple sunrise are reflections of the sun, hanging in the sky.

Belief is a deep sense of seeing.

—Dr. Bitha Har Shefi⁵

5. Teacher of Talmud at Hebrew Union College, emerita, scholar and inspiration; this quote is from a lecture. Bitha Har Shefi left this world in 2025.

Sources

The relationship between Sarai and Hagar is given prominence by appearing in the Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. It can be understood as a study in sight: status, prejudice, invisibility, power struggle, and jealousy. All of the issues occurring in human relationships are found in this text, which does not shy away from the difficulties. By reading these seminal texts and observing these holidays, we hope that we can transform our power struggles into compassion, our prejudice into understanding, our lack of sight into seeing the invisible and our jealousies into... love and happiness for the person opposite us. If the senses are ways of attuning ourselves with love and compassion for each other, instances when love and compassion are lacking must be examined so we can learn from them also.

Let us examine verses from Genesis chapter 16 that focus on sight, in order to show the many ways it can be used. The references to God below are non-gendered, egalitarian, and all-inclusive. The biblical text is interspersed with explanations of how we can use it to observe the act of seeing. The characters are Sarai and Abram (later renamed “Sarah” and “Abraham”), a married couple, and Sarai’s handmaid Hagar.

Seeing as status:

He (Abram) cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.

Seeing as competition for status:

And Sarai said to Abram, “The wrong done to me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Creator shall decide between you and me!”

Focus on purely physical seeing (might involve not seeing the needs of the other):

Abram said to Sarai, “Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

This is the *p’shat* level, reading the text as it is, the simplest form of seeing.

Seeing can provide solutions:

An angel of the Fountain of Life found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur.

This is *remez*, a hint of deeper meaning, the emotional hope and feeling that are part of seeking the Fountain of Life.

Seeing can involve direction and escape:

“Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”

This is the *drash* level, storytelling, which gives meaning to seeing and to the text. Storytelling allows us to feel the fear and need to flee. It enables compassion if we identify with the characters in the story.

Seeing is being aware of the Divine Presence, called the “Seeing One,” who spoke to her:

“You are El-roi,” by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after the Seeing One saw me!”

This is the level of *Sod*, or secret understanding, of the text, a connection with the highest form of seeing. Here, Hagar and her plight are seen by God in a personal way.

Being seen is a well-spring of water:

Therefore, the well was called *Be’er-Lahai-Roi* [Well of Life—Where I am Seen]; it is between Kadesh and Bered.

Being seen replenishes our strength, sustains us in hard times. It builds us to become spiritual beings. The very act of being seen is life giving, like water from a well, when we encounter another individual truly as a person.

Hagar was displaced, she was a foreigner. Others did not understand her, perhaps leaving her feeling unimportant and unseen as a second wife. When she could not be the object of love or acceptance, she sought sustenance from a well of water.

An elevated level of seeing is being seen by God. Hagar is one of the few people to whom God comforts and speaks directly.

And the angel of God said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.”

And the angel of the God said to her, “I will greatly increase your offspring, And they shall be too many to count.”

The angel of the God said to her further, “Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son.”⁶

6. Genesis 16:9-1.

There, an angel of God found Hagar and comforted her. This child becomes Ishmael, “the one who is heard by God.” The seeing God spoke to her and promised her a long and meaningful line of descendants, revealing that she had potential growing within her; she was pregnant both physically and metaphorically with the potential to grow spiritually. Hagar was further comforted that God would listen to her child. She felt seen in her time of trouble and ill treatment. God speaks to very few people in the Bible, but he spoke to this handmaid through an angel. *Hagar is us* when we feel unseen or downtrodden.

She names the fountain or well — crucial symbols for gaining sustenance in spiritual care — “*Be’er Lachai Ro’i*, the Well of Life Where I am Seen.” The Well of Life can symbolize the resilience of the human spirit in crisis. Being seen gives us connection, purpose and a chance to help, interact and be helped. Hagar calls God, “the God of Seeing.” She was seen in her time of troubles. She was addressed and spoken to. She is a person who has experienced hardship and who emerged from it with a well of compassion, one of the few people in the Bible to whom God speaks directly. This is an important lesson about status. God sees and includes people of all ranks. It is humans who compartmentalize.

A young man who was slight in stature and always in motion — blessing, praying, swaying — had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia. He told me that his name is “Merchavya” (which means “the wide space of God”). He wore a funky head covering, and seemed overjoyed with his room, overjoyed with his treatment. Because his diagnosis was brand new, I sensed that his mood was out of sync with his situation, and as his story unfolded, I observed that he was also experiencing mental health

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issues. One minute, he was evoking haunting supplications on his flute, the next he was blessing his bread, which he then forgot to eat, because he was fiddling with the stand that held his medicine. He told me that he didn't work at a job, because he was occupied with praising God, praying, and going to the *mikveh* [ritual bath]; therefore, he knew that he would be healed without delay. Reading his medical file, I did not get the sense that he had a mental illness. Merchavya's story unfolded as his relationship with me, the medical staff and the department psychologist developed.

Instinctively, I felt respect and acceptance for who he was, and entranced that he played the flute, sang, and prayed. I learned this by seeing the beauty in every human being and reflecting it back to them. This is a helpful path to the healthy part of the human spirit that is not defined by the disease.

At first, he made an effort to present as a typical, healthy person, but with time, and further complications, he let his reality be seen. I already had a glimpse and was connected to his beautiful spirit. We discussed passages from the Torah, sang together, and laughed. Merchavya discussed his fears and concerns; when his trust in me grew, he allowed me to see his wish to give up. Although it was difficult for him, he could share his pain with me because we had built a connection of trust. He felt a strong urge to remain positive, feeling that otherwise he would disappoint his faith in God as Healer. Through three visits, I did not observe even one family member at his side, which is rare.

The psychologist and I discussed Merchavya's case, and he explained to me that he had diagnosed him as having a non-specific personality disorder, which is acknowledged by the entire staff. As a team, the staff was relieved that I had formed a connection

with him because they found him challenging. Collective seeing is important for finding ways to reach any given person.

I was present when Merchavya told his physician that he did not believe in his treatment. He wanted to go home and “just be left in peace.” The doctor sat on his bed, a good listener, and agreed that he could have ten days of “peace,” thus respecting his needs, and then encouraged him to carry on with the unpleasant treatment after a break. It would have been inappropriate for me to weigh in on this decision in any way. That is not my job.

The fact that the entire staff saw Merchavya for whom he was allowed him to both be himself, and to receive help and treatment. I looked forward to continuing to see him on the ward.

Seeing is holiness, seeing is caring, but seeing can cause jealousy and make someone want to rip out the others’ eyes. Jealousy is more blindness than seeing because it focuses on what I want, rather than on the other person. Seeing can give life or save life, it can cause your friend to shine or your child to know that they are cherished. In Hebrew, the word “friend” (*chaver*) has the same root as the word meaning connection, to be attached to someone. We connect to others by seeing them deeply. Seeing and loving are connected through the web of interaction.

What does a child want from a parent? Only to be seen. To be observed. Children who are truly seen by their parents are less likely to seek attention elsewhere. A dictionary definition of the word “respect” includes the following, “adj. 1. To feel or show deferential regard for; esteem. 2. To avoid violation or interference with; respect the law... –n. 3. Willingness to show consideration or deference.”⁷ Seeing is giving respect, and after receiving a good dose of parental respect, children can internalize it as self-love.

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7. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 1362.

Self-love, or perhaps looking inward with acknowledgment, is the rare and precious quality that balances the soul.

The act of seeing is not merely physical; it also involves the ability to see with the heart. A blind person can see as clearly, or perhaps in a more focused manner, than a seeing person. This topic will be developed below and subsequent chapters.

When I visit the art galleries of the world, I am filled with radical amazement and am touched in a very deep place. What in this



"The Sick Child," by Edvard Munch 1907 reflecting on his sister's death. National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

painting moves you? The touch? The bowed head of the visitor? The child's innocence and beauty, straight back, illuminated face? Can you perceive the inner world of both figures? What do the vibrant colors do for you? In spiritual care, art may be used as a trigger to speak about associations, emotions, and coping mechanisms. Art can be healing and expressive in this way.

Orah (whose name means "light"), who lived in the retirement home, was blind. She was younger than the other residents, but had nowhere else to go. She did not like human contact and it was hard to get to know her. I observed how the caregivers put her food in front of her in separate dishes so that she could find each item. I noticed how they groomed her, and dressed her in attractive clothes, and did her hair. This way, she received compliments, and knew that she "looked" well. Orah never seemed to see herself positively or look at herself kindly. Therefore, she was usually experienced as a prickly desert cactus. Yet with the compassion of the staff, Orah was loved unconditionally. Orah must have had a special light. She could not see with her eyes, but the thoughtful staff made sure that her environment reflected back to her a sense of empowerment and acceptance.

The Biblical story of Balaam and the donkey offers an unprecedented, ironic lesson about seeing... In a unique comic moment in the Bible, a female donkey can see what a human cannot! The phrase "*vateire ha'aton*, the female donkey saw" is used three times.⁸ Three times the donkey sees an angel of God standing on the path. The angel is trying to stop her master/rider Balaam from cursing the Jewish people. Three times the rider beats his animal for not obeying him, for having a will of her own. With divine power and inspiration, the donkey speaks, "What have

8. Numbers 22:21-33.

9. Numbers 22:28. I done to you that you have beaten me these three times?"⁹ Balaam eventually realizes that perhaps he has been an ass and his donkey has been wise. The choice of animal in the narrative is not coincidental. Balaam's eyes are divinely opened to see what was evident the entire time. This is often the case in the Bible narrative, the obvious is present but not *seen*; eventually Balaam sees the anger of God. Justice is done. Revelation occurs when an animal is more discerning than a human, when she sees what is ultimately right and wrong. Cursing an entire people is a form of blindness. Revelation is becoming able to SEE evident truths. The rider, Balaam, learns a lesson in how to see goodness in a people toward whom he carried blind prejudice. "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel."¹⁰ Seeing goodness, not carrying prejudice, blessing instead of cursing, these are the lessons that deep spiritual SEEING reveals in this Biblical passage.
10. Numbers 24:5.

Emanuel Levinas, a humanistic philosopher of the last century, wrote:

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one "puts the things in question in giving")—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.¹¹

11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 76

One of the most beautiful ways of seeing is face-to-face, aware of the divinity of the other person. Levinas recognizes the Divine spark in gazing at another's face, the communication that happens when beholding the other.

Guiding Principles

Seeing goes beyond the physical senses into the spiritual realm. Seeing the other deeply can be healing. Seeing involves respect and love. The saddest, loneliest person might be uplifted by being seen. Being seen is the opposite of being judged. It is connecting.

Inner Work

Here is an exercise for seeing, or helping another to see, through guided imagery.

Find the most comfortable position possible. Let your eyes close gently. Let your attention rest on your breathing. Take three cleansing breaths, breathe in clean fresh air, and exhale any tension you may be feeling. Take a second breath and breathe in healthy air, and then slowly release any tiredness. Take a third deep breath of renewal and breathe out any anxiety that you are feeling. Now breathe normally, and follow your breath as an anchor. In this changing situation, in the ups and downs of life, your breath is a constant for returning to the present moment. Breathe out the worries of the past, and the planning for the future. If a thought comes to you, name it “thought,” place it on a pink cloud and watch the cloud float away. Without judging yourself, gently bring yourself back to your anchoring breath. The breath is an anchor in the rocking boat of life. Feel your chest rise and fall. Feel your stomach expand and deflate. Feel the air enter your nostrils. Be in the present moment only.

Imagine in your mind’s eye that you are on a cliff above the sea. You are safe; it is quiet. Feel the sea breeze on your face and smell

the fresh, salty smell of the sea. Listen to the waves breaking on the sand, jingling the seashells and rocks in a symphony of the ocean. See the deep turquoise of the sea, and see the shades of deep blue, the greens of the water, depending on its depth. There are rock pools near the shore, they fill up with water each time a wave comes in and empty every time the wave moves out. Hear the music of the movement of the rock pools and waves, seashells. See the white outline of the foam on the sand. You are gazing down from a safe place high above the water. You are fanned by a gentle sea breeze of pleasant air. Remember to breathe and use your breath as an anchor.

Feel the solidity of Mother Earth beneath you, supporting you, grounding you. What texture do you feel? What is right around you on the cliff high above the sea?

Breathe in the view. Rest your imagination on the horizon. The horizon is the gentle line between sea and sky. See that the sun is bright but setting; it is late afternoon. We are entering the magical time of early evening. Watch the sun sink down below the cloud and become a bright ball of pink, red, and orange, just above the water. Watch as the sun, a full, round ball of brilliant color, touches the water, kisses it. The brilliant ball of red and pink sinks and submerges halfway into the water and balances there. You watch as the sun sets in the water. The sky lights up with streaks of purple and pink. The clouds look like mountain peaks in a sea of color. There are rays of yellow, pink, and then dark purple across the sky. Darkness descends peacefully over the sea. The moon slowly rises. The first star comes out, perhaps it is the planet Venus. Then more stars, and more until there is a veil of stars in the sky. You recognize your favorite constellations

— Orion, the Big Dipper — twinkling down at you and filling you with the calm and peace of nighttime. There is a glimmering path from the moon across the sea, a moon path. Breathe in the nighttime peace and serenity.

You are safe. You are peaceful. Bask in the moon, stars and nighttime calm. Listen to the waves still filling the rock pools. Sit in silence and peace together, grounded and anchored in our breathing.

After a time, come back to the present moment, to yourself. Rub your hands together (let them make a sound) and put your hands on your eyes. When you are ready, open your eyes and slowly return, while retaining the feeling of stillness and relaxation.

When you do this with a patient and they fall asleep or enter a deep state of relaxation, you may invite them to stay there, say goodbye, remind them to take the peace and calm with them throughout their day, and leave quietly.