

## ***In Looking, there is Choosing – Erev Yom Kippur 5782***

Mommy! Mommy! Look! Daddy, Daddy, look!

Look! I found a feather! It's so soft! Daddy, why did the bird drop its feather?

Mommy, look at that cloud! It looks like a bunny rabbit!

Gramma, Look! I can touch my nose with my tongue!

Grampa, Look! It's raining! Let's go play in the rain!

What wonders are out there? A world of miracles, each moment a mystery, each discovery a revelation. Seeing through a child's eyes is to choose to see the world anew.

Indeed, even God seems to pause in the midst of creation. This happens 7 times, in the first chapter of Genesis<sup>1</sup>, where it says וירא אלהים כי-טוב and God saw, and it was good.

What was it that God saw, and it was good?

Light, when God divided the light from the darkness; the earth and the seas; vegetation; the sun, moon, and stars; swarming creatures, water creatures, and winged birds; beasts of the earth, cattle, creeping things. God then creates man, male and female, and then God saw all that God had made, and it was טוב מְאֹד, *very good*.

And then, in just chapter two of Genesis, the notion of evil is introduced. God instructs Adam that “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it.”<sup>2</sup> We have been introduced to what is good in chapter 1 of Genesis; but what, in God's creation, is evil? We don't find the notion of evil in chapter one of creation, the natural world, which on day six, includes human beings. In the first creation story, there is no moral world of good vs evil, nature just is, it consumes, destroys, begins again, nature just is. It is not until chapter two, when the focus is directly on human beings who are to till and tend the garden, that the concept of good and evil emerges, and the first humans and all humanity become aware of it, as of course Adam and Eve do eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

What purpose would evil serve? Perhaps simply to give an alternative to good – for human beings to have moral choice. For good to exist for humans, and to give the

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1, verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:17

potential of choice and exercise of freewill, we need to see and grasp the meaning of choosing good with our actions, and the impact of the opposite.

In Chapter 4 of Genesis is the first use of the Hebrew word *cheyt*, and a startling example of seeing and choosing. Cain and Abel, the first children, experience God's favoritism as Cain sees that God favors Abel's offering over his. Cain's distress, disappointment and shame is written on his face. God sees this and asks, "Why are you distressed? Why is your face fallen? Surely, if you do good there is uplift, but if not, *cheyt*, sin, lays in the opening and longs for you, but you can be master over it."<sup>3</sup>

Our Torah lays out fundamental notions of what it is to be human.

First, through the metaphor of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, we are taught that we have the capacity for knowledge of good and what is not good.

Second, we are taught that through doing good "there is uplift" but if not, *cheyt*, sin, lays in wait for us, like an animal lying in our path for us to stumble over. And we are told that we have the capacity to see it and be master over it. Thus, we have choice, we have freewill. We also have the capacity for inner awareness – we learn that for Cain the stumbling block was not really "out there" but rather, it was within Cain – and how Cain chose to respond.

If you have noted that "*cheyt*" sounds like our *Al Cheyt* prayer – you are correct. Our Yom Kippur morning service sets aside time for silent confession which is then followed by the "*Al Cheyt*," a public recitation of our transgressions against God. Each transgression is phrased in the plural, we say them as a community. The community's sins against God are these: malicious gossip, sexual immorality, gluttony, narrow mindedness, fraud, and falsehood, hating without cause, arrogance, insolence, irreverence, hypocrisy, passing judgment on others, exploiting the weak, giving and taking bribes, giving way to our hostile impulses, and running to do evil. On these High Holy Days we name and examine our transgressions, our sins, beating our chest. Above all, we must recognize them. If we do not see them, we may simply stumble into them. If we do not see, we do not have choice in dealing with them.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 4:6-7

Cain illustrates the heartbreak of being shown what to master, and what is good, and how Cain did not see, did not choose to see, and had no choice in his response. He had no freedom. He did not attempt to master the jealousy and inner feelings that overwhelmed him – jealousy, anger, righteousness, and fear are but a few of the human qualities that tend to blind us. Cain does not look within, he does not see. As a result, the first human family suffers heartbreaking loss. The first murder is fratricide. Adam and Eve grieve for over a hundred years.

Many chapters later, well into Genesis, we see this phrase again, וירא יהוה *Adonai sees*. *God sees* that our matriarchs, Leah, and Rachel do not yet have children with their husband Jacob. Through much angst, competition for love and for children between the sisters, and ultimately with God seeing and choosing to open their wombs, Leah and Rachel and their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah have children who become the twelve tribes of Israel. In time, the tribes go down to Egypt because of famine, and the Israelites become enslaved to Pharaoh for several generations.

I find one of the most fascinating places in our Torah is an occurrence of this phrase, *Adonai sees*, when Moses is at the burning bush. Moses sees, and God sees. Each make a choice. Moses, climbing the mountain to find a stray from his flock, sees the burning bush, and says, “I must turn aside to see this grand sight, why doesn’t the bush burn up?” Moses sees and chooses to turn and see more deeply the wondrous sight before him. God sees this, and God chooses Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery.

The Sages debate back and forth, why did God pick Moses to be the leader, to lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom? Perhaps because if this humble shepherd, caring for his father-in-law’s flock, even one stray, could show such compassion to one animal, thus, God chose Moses to be the one to shepherd God’s flock, the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> Consider also, that Moses cared not only for the flock, but had the protective, keen sight of a shepherd, and saw the grand sights around him as well. Moses could see the goodness and wonder in God’s creation, and with wonder ask: why doesn’t the bush burn up?

In the final chapters of Deuteronomy, and the final days of his life, Moses repeats all the instructions to the children of the Israelites who came out of slavery in Egypt, and says

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus Rabbah 2:2, adapted.

to them: “Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.” (Deut. 30:11) Just a few verses later, the verb “to see,” this time is a command: “See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.” (Deut. 30:15). “For I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep God’s commandments, God’s laws, and God’s rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.” (30:16). “I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life — so that you and your offspring would live — by loving the Lord your God, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to God. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure...” (30:19-20)

We have traversed, using the word “to see” as our guide, significant passages from the first chapters of Torah to the major messages in its final chapters. And these verses from Deuteronomy are from our Torah reading for the day of Yom Kippur...

Life is a choice. God is essentially pleading with us. Look! See! Choose life! — by loving the Lord your God, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to God. But God noticed early on that we humans do not like being told what to do. We don’t listen, we believe what we want to, we often don’t think things through, we stretch our words and bend them, we lie. We believe our own lies. We have the whole list of *Al Cheyts* that we recite together. In my mind I see God holding her head in her hands, and saying of us, “What are they doing?!”

Ken and I now have had three family dogs during our life together, and we have joked humbly that it is hard not to notice that our Labradors have been more likely to follow instructions than us human beings. We humans tend to balk and reject instructions. But our text reminds us, Choose life – that you and your offspring would live! How? — by loving the Lord your God, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to God. And, it is of vital importance to more than just us or our family that we do. My teacher Rabbi Mel Gottlieb teaches that the Torah is given to us in order to make of each of us a mensch. We need more mensches in our world.

There’s a wonderful teaching – a potential convert came to Shammai and demanded, teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot. Shammai scoffed and sent the

person away. That same person came and stood before Hillel, and demanded, teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot. Hillel responded: that which is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the whole Torah. Now go and study.

When we study Torah, we look, we see newly, wonder, discover and debate, we find values, instructions, and demand clarification. We discover what to do, and what not to do. As an example, our Jewish values instruct us that saving a life, *pikuach nefesh*, is of utmost importance, even as far as superseding the observance of Shabbat if necessary. Even civil laws have some parallel – the law that says not to drink and drive. Obviously, so that we do not endanger our own life, but the lives of others as well. It is easy to insist on our own personal freedom, we want to do what we want to do! But our tradition puts community first. When the Israelites were freed from slavery it was not to just go be free and do what we wanted. We made our way to Mt. Sinai, and standing at the base of the mountain, we received laws, not rights.<sup>5</sup> We became not Pharaoh's servants, but servants of God. What is not obvious at first glance is that the truest expression of freedom is to strive to reveal the best in our selves. The Torah was given to each of us in order to make of each of us a mensch.

How do we choose life?

We choose life by aligning our lives with living a moral life, living our lives in alignment with Jewish values and ethics, teachings of Torah, and the performance of mitzvot.

We choose life by recognizing the good – in nature, in the sky, in the energy of light, animals and birds, of the mystery of life itself.

We choose life through awe and wonder. It is through the encounter with “looking,” that we find moments of awe. These two words are expressed with very similar words in the Hebrew. תראה is Look! יראה is awe, as in a mixture of awe/fear/wonder, for which these High Holy Days, the Days of Awe that begin with Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur are called, Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe.

In the Zohar, a mystical commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Judah said, “When God was about to create man, God consulted the Torah, the blueprint for creation, and she

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<sup>5</sup> Personally heard in a teaching from Rabbi Elliot Dorff

warned God that humans would sin and thereby provoke God. Therefore, before creating the world, God next created *Teshuvah*, saying to her (*Teshuvah*), “I am about to create humans, on condition that when they turn to you from their sins you shall be prepared to forgive their sins and make atonement for them.”<sup>6</sup>

We choose life when we do *teshuvah*, when we return to God, and ultimately, to our truest selves. We choose life when we turn to the Divine in humility, awe, wonder, and gratitude. We choose life when we make amends to others for our failings, when we forgive others for being human, and when we forgive ourselves because we are human.

May we have the courage to turn to the Divine. May the wonder of creation remind us to “look,” and remember the Divine, the Source of Creation. May we see that life’s goodness is right before us, in the blowing of the wind, the sunrise, the song of the birds, the fascinating shape and movement of a drop of water, in the discoveries and questions of a child. May our awe and wonder bring us closer to the Divine, may we see the gift of each moment. May we choose to be God’s messengers and God’s hands in this world. May we choose to live in a way that seeks to reveal the best in ourselves.

Look. See. Choose life. Choose life.  
May our very lives be prayer.

G’mar chatimah tovah,  
Rabbi Lisa Bock

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<sup>6</sup> Zohar Vayikra 3, 69b (thank you to Rabbi Jill Zimmerman for this source, from Path With Heart)