

Returning to our Senses #1: Eyes

Rabbi Mishael Zion | Text and the City | Elul 2015

*Three organs are under a person's control:
the mouth, the hands, and the feet.
Three are not under one's control:
the eyes, the ears, and the nose.
Midrash Tanhuma, Toledot #12*

This summer I studied with the 2015 Bronfman Fellows about various commandments relating to our senses and organs. Our focus was commandments of the Mouth: eating, gossiping, rebuking and praying. But the text that seemed to spark the most amount of thought and debate was the quote above from the Tanhuma. Are our organs under our control? Do we want them to be? Inspired by these questions, I've been using Elul, with its invitation for reflection and returning, to try to "come to my senses". Focusing on how I control my sensory organs - and how they control me. Between now and Yom Kippur I hope to share texts and inspirations on those organs that are under our control (according to the Midrash), and those that aren't.

This first piece reflects on the **eyes**.

גַּל עֵינַי וְאֶבְיטָה (תהלים קיט:יח)

Uncover my eyes / So I can see (Psalms 119:18)

THIS has been a troubling week for our eyes. A human crises of global magnitude, brewing for years, crashed upon our eyes with one poignant, painful image. What the eyes have taken in cannot be erased. Cover my eyes, the online world begged. In our usual human weakness, it was not until the eyes SAW that we were shocked into realization, and empathy set in. Will action follow? "Uncover my eyes / so I

09/17/15

can see."

Our eyes can be a wonderful moral actor, allowing us to go beyond ourselves and see the Other. And yet they are also our biggest

adulterers. **Our eyes are always somewhere other than where we are.** Always hungry, on the prowl, never satiated. Beyond our control, says the Tanhuma and gives up. Yet a deeper look teaches that it is not simply about what we see, but what kind of gaze we embrace; what kind of eyes we develop.

Slit Eyed Looks

*“Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai said to his students:
Go out and see – what is the key to the straight path a person should choose?
Rabbi Eliezer said: A good eye.” (Mishna Avot 2:9)*

*“We have sinned before you in narrow eyes
We have sinned before you in conspiratorial eyes,
We have sinned before you in proud eyes,
We have sinned before you in baseless hatred.” (From the Yom Kippur
confessional)*

על חטא שֶׁחָטְאוּנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּצָרוֹת עֵינַי... בְּשִׁקּוֹר עֵינַי... בְּעִינָיִים רְמוֹת... בְּשִׁנְאוֹת חֵינָם

IN the Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides writes that 90% of all evil in the world is caused by man (the rest by the laws of nature, by the way, not by God, God forbid). The reason for human evil – is that Man experiences the worlds resources as a zero sum game. If *you* have something, it means there is less for *me*. The crucial resources are not just land, money, belongings, but eventually – love. Is there enough love for me too? That essential question of sibling rivalry, epitomized by what Cain felt that morning when God paid attention to Abel’s offering, and not to his. This town isn’t big enough for the both of us.

“Narrow eyes” refer to employing a zero sum game view of the world. “What you have – I want. The fact that you have it and I don’t makes it impossible for me to be happy for you”. I cannot look at the Other



without immediately comparing to my own state. Narrow eyes engender conspiratorial eyes: “How can I get that for myself”. Both reflect an inability to see the Other on their own terms. The narrow glance – unwilling to be satiated with my own share – is the root of our betrayal of the Other, and of ourselves. Faith, says Rav Shneur Zalman of Liady, is about believing that “there is enough”, that the world is not a zero sum game. Turning from a materialistic world view to a spiritual one. What Rabbi Eliezer called: “Having a good eye”. Narrow eyes at their core are heretical – they claim that God does not have enough love in the world for everyone.

Eye to Eye, Face to Face

It is striking that the Yom Kippur confession focuses not on the actual transgressions against others, but on the distortions of our consciousness which led (or even just potentially might lead) to harming others. Rav Shagar (Shimon Gershon Rosenberg) connects narrow eyes to the next sin on the list: baseless hatred.

“The distortions of Narrow eyes and Conspiratorial Eyes are intertwined and cause the third and gravest sin: Baseless Hatred. Hasidism interpreted Baseless Hatred (Sinat Hinam) as hatred that emanates from the basic existence of the Other. The very fact that he exists irritates and burdens me. He burdens me because his very gaze causes me to lose my freedom, and from there a deep hatred rages forth, seeking to eliminate them.

This sin is the source of shame – we can no longer look each other in the eye, face to face. Standing “face to face” represents a sphere in which we can treat each other favorably, celebrate in the others existence. Kabbalah describes the mythical process of the High Holidays as generating a return of the divine faces back to being “face to face”, bringing back the simplicity, the warmth and the trust to relationships.” (“At the Door”, Rav Shagar Sermons for the High Holidays, 2001).

Breaking the Gaze

Within the writings of the great Teshuva movement called Gender studies, [Laura Mulvey](#) has taught us to see the male gaze employed all around us. Her call for Teshuva focused on the film industry, the way the camera lingers over the curves of a woman's



body, putting the audience into the perspective of a heterosexual man. She's allowed us to see how from "high" western art to street billboards to HBO, we're constantly invited to internalize a sexualized gaze. In my dreams I envision a coming together of feminist theory about the [male gaze](#) and halakhic moralisms about **keeping of the eyes** (shmirat ha-einyayim). In one respect this is the most patriarchal of Halakhot: don't gaze at women says the [Shulkhan Arukh \(Even haEzer 21\)](#). Any flight between New York and Tel Aviv invites an encounter with an Ultra Orthodox man lowering his eyes when confronted with a woman (then asked to be moved to a different seat on the plane...). The most jarring move of modern "modesty" discourse across religions has been the externalizing of the male gaze: instead of men being required to control their gaze, *women* are required to dress in a way that keeps the eyes of those men for them. The internal moral move of changing our gaze has become an external – and immoral – demand from others.

Can we get **Shmirat haeinyayim** to "do Teshuva", returning to its source as a conjunction against applying the sexualized male gaze towards other people? One good place to start is with the Shulkhan Arukh's commentator the Magen Avraham, who explains that the prohibition on looking at women is not about mere *looking* but about embracing a certain kind of *gaze*. Just as we are prohibited from "feeding our eyes" off the Priests when they offer Birkat Kohanim (the Priestly Benediction), he explains, so we must not "feed our eyes" off of people in a sexualized look. Helping our world wean itself off of the sexualized male gaze – and the fundamentalist response to it – could be a wonderful joint agenda of Feminists and Halakhists.



09/17/15

Eyes of Beauty, Eyes of Praise

So how *should* we look? Where does having a good eye start? Our technological age allows our eyes to see anything and everything in the world. We have seen it all before, on some google search somewhere. This spring I travelled to Arizona, encountering with my eyes some of the most beautiful views I had ever seen. Yet at first the redness of the rocks did not influence me – I had already seen it on my beautiful HD computer screen. The 2D HD image in my memory prevented me from truly seeing, from making room for a new, full gaze, of the beauty I had around me. My eyes were weary, cynical and unappreciative. It took several hours, days, until I could truly see what was right in front of me. And if it is so for radical beauty – how much more so for mundanity.

"I want to always have eyes to see / the beauty of the world and to praise"
wrote [Natan Zach](#), begging to "never become blind to the beauty of the world".
As Rosh haShana celebrates the birth of the world, it's a time to turn weary eyes into fresh eyes, to appreciate the beauty of creation, to embrace eyes that seek it out.

Taking Rosh haShana as an eye-cleanse – from screens, from cynicism, for mundanity – to eyes that see so much beauty it makes us burst into praise. When our eyes dwell on beauty, forcing us to appreciate the inherent beauty found in the mundane – we can see the world, others and ourselves anew, and believe the world is not a zero sum game after all.

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