

Her Eyes Said So
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This past year, just before Pesach, a dear friend of mine had a stroke. It was a significant stroke that initially left him paralyzed and without speech. Upon hearing the news, I rushed down to the hospital to see him. When I arrived, he was stable and physically comfortable but you could see the look in his eyes. As he was unable to move his right side and could not talk, he lifted his left hand and we held hands for a minute. I tried to make conversation by doing both sides of the dialogue, but eventually I realized how frustrating that was for him so I stopped and we just held hands. I looked into his eyes and what I saw was fear. He was afraid of what happened, he was afraid of what was going to be. He was afraid of being alone. He was afraid...and I could see it in his eyes...but there was more. He would raise an eyebrow and I noticed a moment when the fear subsided and a sincere look of appreciation came over me. I realized he was saying thank you. Then his eyes grew tired and I knew it was time to go. We connected. As his ability to speak has grown in the past few months, we've had a chance to give word to what we already knew about each other and about the connection we felt in those few hours just after his stroke. It's similar to the eye contact you make with anyone, whether you know them or not, and there is just an understanding. Maybe it's across a crowded room at a party, maybe it's with a spouse at a dinner in a loud restaurant, you just know it when you feel it.

Non-verbal communication is so much a part of how we interact. Messages can be communicated through facial expressions; gestures; and posture; they include clothing, hairstyles, adornment, shoes,. Nonverbal communication can occur through any sensory channel — sight, sound, smell, touch or taste – but nothing is as powerful as a gaze into another's eyes. Now I know it's uncomfortable but it's something we must grow accustomed to doing. It's a connection that cannot be replaced by a word or a touch. There are so many times when I greet another person and in that brief handshake I catch a glimpse of something, something that I cannot put my finger on, something that isn't quite right. Then I have to ask, "Is everything alright?"

Reading people is a skill that I developed. In fact, I find reading text is much more difficult to do. In this week's torah reading, I found a wonderful moment when we are asked to read not just the text, but also the person.

In the stories of our matriarchs and our patriarchs, we tend to focus on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. Though we mention Leah, she was never really the focus. At best, Leah was an obstacle on the way to Jacob fulfilling his destiny. Rachel is the beautiful sister, the one who attracted the attention of Jacob, the one with whom Jacob fell in love, the one for whom Jacob worked -- but poor Leah. While Rachel caught Jacob's eye, it was Leah who had the sad eyes and that is exactly how the text describes her.

After Jacob had lived with Lavan for a month, they finally decide they must have a contract of sorts. Jacob is valuable to have around and he has proven his worth so Lavan wants to lock him into a commitment. He no longer wants a day worker; he wants to move to a salaried employee

so he asks, “What do you want to make?” Although we imagine they will now negotiate a salary, they turn their attention to Leah and Rachel. Once again, in case we had already forgotten, Rachel is the pretty one. Then, remarkably, the Torah describes Leah as having *einayim rakot*, (Genesis 29:17) translated by our Etz Hayim Humash as “weak eyes.” Trying to explain what *einai Leah rakot* means, the midrash puts forth the idea that her eyes were tired *Rakot m’bichiya*, as a result of weeping when she heard her younger sister would be married to Jacob while she would be married to Esau.

What a bizarre rumor, we haven’t even heard of Esau in the discussion. We want to yell out to Leah, “That doesn’t make any sense,” but she wouldn’t be able to hear us. You know the story of the sister so often cast aside with preference always going to the more beautiful. You can imagine that Leah’s eyes aren’t tired of crying, they’re just tired of rejection. It must have been so difficult to live in Rachel’s shadow...and Leah’s eyes call out in prayer. *Yihi Ratzon she’lo epol b’goralo shel rasha*, and I paraphrase, “God, I am not an evil person, I have done nothing wrong, God don’t let this happen again – don’t let me be forgotten again.” Leah’s eyes beg for another destiny. With just two words the Rabbis are able to register a mindset, a battery of emotion, a life of being left out and left behind. Without a single verbal utterance, Leah, with the help of the Rabbis of the midrash, expresses a life of heartache and disappointment. Though I have to tell you I love the comment by the Rabbis, I think their reading of the text may be a little off.

When the text remarks that Leah had *einayim rakot*, weak eyes, I think the narrative just means she had eyes of concession, eyes of giving up, eyes of surrender. Her eyes say, “I quit. I can’t do this anymore.” That is a far more excruciating place to be. I think the tears have long dried up and I think the Leah we find here is a Leah defeated. It’s right there in her eyes and no one can miss it. The pain Leah feels seems so obvious to us, the reader. In the next sentence, with no lapse, no second thought, the text says, “Jacob loved Rachel” with no mention of Leah at all. I believe the text is admonishing Jacob – “How come you don’t notice her? Why is it that even though you are in love with Rachel, you don’t see anyone else?”

There are people all around us that go unnoticed with the same expression on their faces, the same look in their eyes. We must learn how to see them. It’s hard and it takes work, but we can all learn to do it. If we can, if we do, we can ease a moment of pain and redirect a life. Just by looking into someone’s eyes, we can see what’s going on in their souls. Cicero (106-43 B.C.) is quoted as saying, *oculus animi index*, the eye is the index of the mind. The eyes are the windows to the soul.

I was a good child with a unique sense of humor and a wonderfully kind soul, but school was torture. I tried to ease the pain by cracking jokes, but I was unable to keep up in school and by the end of the first grade I was noticeably behind in reading. A meeting was held with my parents and the school principal. They decided that it would be best for me to repeat the first grade. Of course, this would put me behind my age group for the remainder of my school years, but they could explain that this was because my birthday was close to the cutoff date for the next class year in school. Of course, someone had to explain to me why I was going to have to stay in first grade while all of my peers moved on.

So, to explain this meeting was scheduled with the first grade teacher, the principal and my parents. With gentle gestures and warm tones, Mrs. Cohen took me onto her lap, a gentleness that I have tried to emulate all my life. Silence fell over the room because no one had the right words. There were uncomfortable jokes and small talk but I wasn't really listening. Then Mrs. Cohen began talking and she explained that next year I would be her personal helper and teacher's aid. She gently breaks the news that I will remain behind with her. The pain is devastating – no matter the kindness. It couldn't be. I know I have trouble following. I know school was hard, but now I was going backwards. Instead of getting closer to finishing, I was going backwards. However, I learned the first great lesson of my life. Mrs. Cohen looked at me and with her eyes she explained it was going to be all right. I learned how to read a face. Even if I couldn't read a word, I learned to read a face. Even though I couldn't bear the news, Mrs. Cohen assured me I would be fine – and her eyes said so.