

## FROM SIGHT TO INSIGHT

lessons gained from the loss of vision

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767

It was not quite two years ago, as I was shopping in the CVS over on Claremont when I noticed a smudge on my glasses, so I took them off and cleaned them with my sweater. A couple of minutes later I noticed that it was still there, so again I repeated the procedure. Still there. Then I decided to look a little closer at my glasses. Maybe it was a scratch? But as I was examining the lens, I noticed that the smudge was still there—but I was holding my glasses in my hand.

I didn't think too much of it at the time. Maybe I had a scratched cornea (whatever that is), maybe I had rubbed too hard and somehow irritated my eye? Anyhow, I could still see fine. Or so I thought. Until the next night. It was Wednesday, Religious School was going through its evening transition—from the afternoon to nighttime session. As I parked my car and started walking into the building I saw the off-duty policeman directing traffic as parents were dropping-off or picking-up their kids. But as I walked over to say "Hi" he looked up and said, "Watch out," but it was too late. I had walked into and knocked over the bright red, burning flare (which was sticking up in the middle of the driveway). I never saw it.

The next day I knew something was wrong. I called my ophthalmologist and made an appointment for Friday afternoon. He did the usual stuff eye doctors do: sat me in the chair, made some nice small-talk, asked about the family—all while he was moving his finger from my right to my left. "Tell me when you stop seeing my finger," he said, as he slowly ran his index finger across my field of vision. He sat down, made some notes in my file, excused himself for a minute, then came back in. "I want you to go see this doctor," he said, handing me one of those doctor's appointment notes. "Okay, should I call to make an appointment?" "No, I've already done that. I want you to go right now. Can you get there before 4:30 p.m.?" It was 4 o'clock. "Uh, sure, if I'm lucky with traffic." The doctor was about 8 miles away.

They were waiting for me when I arrived. I was taken into the doctor's office and, after another quick examination, I was ushered into a special room with what looked to be some pretty high-tech imaging equipment. "We're going to insert a dye into your bloodstream to make it easier to examine your optic nerve," the technician said. The test was over in about 20 minutes. Then they ushered me back into the doctor's office. He showed me the film, pointing out a small cloudy area in the back of the eye. "It could be something," he said, "or maybe not. I want you to go outside to the receptionist and make an appointment for an MRI." "An MRI?" I asked. "Of what?" "Your brain. Can we do this tomorrow?"

Funny the way things work out. This was Friday. *Erev Shabbat*. Rabbis aren't allowed to get sick on *Shabbos*. But the next day—*Shabbat morning*—was like the one Saturday of the year that we didn't have a *Bar* or a *Bat Mitzvah*. I made the appointment for 10:30 a.m. For one-half hour I lay inside that sterile white tunnel, my head firmly cushioned, with a set of pretty heavy headphones given to me to help drown out the sound of the banging. It didn't help. I asked for something loud and classical. Like Beethoven. It didn't make much difference. Every time the banging started (which is the sound of the magnetic imaging process, something akin to a jack-hammer next to your head), I could hear nothing but the sound of my heart.

Then came the wait. Waiting for the doctor to read the results. Of course, my mind was awash with every possible scenario. Brain tumor was at the top of the list. But a few days later the

doctor called to say the pictures came back negative. Whatever it was, it wasn't life-threatening. At that point I didn't care what the diagnosis was. All I knew was that I was going to live. Nothing else mattered. A couple of weeks later I saw the neuro-ophthalmologist. The diagnosis was in: NAION. Non-arteritic-ischemic-optic-neuropathy. In other words, I had a burst (or blocked) small blood vessel, (actually, a *really* small blood vessel) but not an artery, behind my eye, that leads to the optic-nerve. The loss of blood flow had caused damage to the optic nerve. Time would tell how much.

For the next two months the vision in my right eye slowly deteriorated. My field of vision got smaller and smaller. By the time it had stabilized I had lost most of the sight in my right eye. Reading with just that eye was impossible. I could still see forms. I could walk with my other eye closed, but driving would be impossible without my *good* eye. And the message from every doctor was the same: the damage done to the optic nerve is irreparable. It will never get any better.

For some time now I have debated whether or not to share this information with you. We all have our personal stuff. Mine is hardly as serious as what any number of you currently struggle with. On a scale of health concerns, it ranks pretty low.

I've also had my reservations about making this public because I didn't want to seem too self-absorbed. This isn't the Kushner show, what I do up here is not supposed to be about me. It's about us. But I've learned that some lessons I have been privileged to explore with you—from visiting my family's ancestral home in Ukraine, to watching an old woman move out of her house, to purchasing a 170 year-old portrait, to sitting at my mother's side as she drew her last breath—have come from my own personal experience.

I believe we all have stories to tell. I believe that there are lessons to be learned and taught in each of our lives. For the better part of the last two years I have been trying to make sense of this blindness in my right eye, not in the sense of *why* but rather *what*. What can I learn from this? And what can I teach?

Three truths have so far emerged for me.

The first is "forever". When the doctors told me that there is no known cure to NAION, that the damage done to the optic nerve is "irreparable", I came to have a new appreciation for the notion of something being "forever". I will never really see out of my right eye again. Of course, this is no great *chokhmah* or wisdom. If we stop and think about it, everything that happens to us—particularly within the context of aging—is forever. But sometimes God sends us these little reminders that time is not unlimited, that the grains in the hour-glass only run in one direction and sometimes these reminders drive the point home a little more forcefully than others.

I've never had a problem with losing my hair. And all those hair-replacement therapies notwithstanding, it's never really bothered me. My dad was bald. Both my grandfathers were bald. My aunt Betty was bald. The concept of aging has never really burdened me (dying yes, aging no). I have always seen it as a process of growth, filled with new doorways, new opportunities. But the loss of sight drives home that truth that the longer I live the more things I will lose—forever. Sometimes they will be replaced by new things, but sometimes they won't.

Each day, each morning when we rise, our tradition offers the opportunity to acknowledge this sacred truth:

*Modeh ani l'fanecha Melekh chai v'kayam she-he-chezarta bi nishmati b'chemla rabba emunatecha.* I stand before You, Eternal living Presence, for in Your abundant and faithful compassion, You have returned my soul within me.

Each day we are re-born. Each day we are offered a renewed shot at life. Like so many other failures of my life, I don't say this prayer every day. And often when I do, I hardly pay attention to what it is I am saying.

How easy it is to dismiss life's greatest truth:

*Zeh hayom asah Adonai; nagila v'nis'mecha vo.*  
This is the day God has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

But if there is any one prayer of which my NAION made me acutely aware, it is what I used to jokingly refer to as the "holes and orifices" prayer:

"Praised are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries and vital organs into a finely balanced network. Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it would be impossible to stand before You. Wondrous Fashioner and Sustainer of life, Source of our health and our strength, we give you thanks and praise."

For most of its history, liberal Judaism excised this prayer from our liturgy. And even now that it is back in our prayerbook, I wonder how many of us can recite this text without cringing just a little? It's kind of the equivalent of saying "toilet paper" on TV. Who wants to even think of "bodily functions" during such sublime moments as prayer? Yet of all the truths proclaimed by our prayers, of all the realities affirmed by our theology, this is probably the one text that even the most rational, non-believing among us cannot deny. Simply put, the prayer makes sense. I don't joke about it anymore.

This was the second truth I was forced to face by my NAION. "Should but one of them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function..." Intellectually I have always understood this. It stands to reason. And when I look at my body and I see the veins and vessels beneath my skin, and particularly when I examine those tiny little red lines in my eye, I confess that I hardly give them a second thought. Until now. For the vessel carrying blood to my optic nerve was one of those really small ones, and because it broke, or got clogged, the messages from my right eye don't get to my brain anymore.

Can we not see just what a miracle this thing we call life is? Are we blind to its wonder and beauty? And are we so dulled by our intellectual hubris to actually think that this intricate weave of molecules is but the result of random chaos? The theological question should not be "Why?" but rather "Why not?" Our lives, which so often get overwhelmed by the times when life doesn't go well, would be so much better served to proclaim and celebrate the mystery of how it is that life does work (and not to abandon our faith when it doesn't). Right now the force of life pulses through us—and yet our thoughts are so easily distracted by trivialities.

I guess I have every right to mourn the partial loss of my eyesight and, to be honest, not a day goes by that I do not test my *bad* eye to see if maybe I can see a little more than I did the day before. Yet for the partial loss of eyesight do I see so much clearer now than I did before.

*Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Ha-Olam, Pokeiach Ivrim.* I praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who opens the eyes of the blind.

But it is the third truth that offers for me the most valued lesson. Like the ancient prophet Hosea, who saw so much of his life through the lens of metaphor, my blindness in just one eye underscores what is truly sacred reality.

Sometime during the next year following the initial occurrence of my new-found condition, I went across the street to “hang” with the neighborhood kids. They were playing catch. Now I have always fancied myself as a pretty decent ballplayer. Not too much bat but pretty good glove. I loved making “tough” catches. So you can imagine my chagrin when one of the kids tossed me the ball and it hit me in the head. And not long after that, as I was just standing outside with some friends, all of a sudden I ducked to avoid getting hit by what I thought was an errant boomerang only to realize that it was one of those whirlybird seeds that spiral down from trees. Yet perhaps the most troubling—if not ultimately the most enlightening—came one Friday night. Erev Shabbat. Going up to the *bimah* before services, as I always do, to kindle the *Shabbos* candles. Except when I went to light the wick I realized I was “missing” it—by about a half-inch.

Depth perception. The truth is, as soon as I knew I was going to lose most of my vision in one eye I anticipated that depth perception would be a problem. So none of these happenings came as much of a surprise. But in the process I also came to have a much greater appreciation of nature and its dualistic design.

Without two eyes we lose depth perception. We can still see, just don't have complete perspective. With hearing in only one ear, we can still hear but we don't get stereo. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see how pervasive this duality is to the fabric of the universe. In fact, it's more than pervasive—it's central. Any 1<sup>st</sup> year biology student can tell you that. But so can the mystics. The *ying-yang*, the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer ha-ra*—the struggles between the good and the evil inclinations, are fundamental components of the universe, and their relationship to each other is essential to the world's balance.

I particularly made this association when reading one of our upcoming B'nai Mitzvah student's *d'var Torah*. Jasmine Eshkar, who will be teaching us about the creation on *Parshat B'reishit* in just a few weeks, insightfully was struck by how so much of the creation story has a built-in duality to it: light and dark, water and earth, all building up to the necessary duality of the human condition—the zenith of the creative process.

Of course we can survive on our own, but how much richer is life when it is spent with an “other”. The one who gives us perspective, the depth-perception for our soul. We can function in the world by ourselves, but how much more we can see through the eyes of the “other”. This applies to all relationships—the casual encounters we have with the stranger at the supermarket, the struggles we have with our parents, the competitions we play out with our brothers and sisters, the love we share with our “other”.

*Lo tov heyot ha-adam l'vado.* It is not good to be alone.

And if this be true then how much the moreso, then, does this need for the “other” apply to the peoples of the earth. So much of the world's conflicts are rooted in fear of the other, in a perceived need to be distinct from the other, when in truth the ultimate *mitzvah* is to love the other “*kamokha*—as yourself.” Our *shalom* in the world depends on this partnering, this uniting

of opposites. And in its absence, when it doesn't happen, when we are not in sync, then we cannot sustain our balance. And if we cannot see that our relationship to God, to our Eternal Thou who brings us into life and sustains us in ways incomprehensible, who is the One in whom such dualities can find unity, is the most important of dyads, then we ultimately walk sightless along our sacred paths.

Most of us who seek the religious life, I think, see our lives as human beings on a spiritual path. But maybe it's the other way around. Perhaps it is better to think of ourselves as spiritual beings on a human path. This way we can see life less as a *journey* and more as a *pilgrimage*, a *quest* for meaning. And it is from this perspective that God may be seen as partner, *HaMakom*—The Place, the spiritual Ground, the foundation, the *Ma'ayan*—the Well-spring, the Center of all being. As Richard Rubenstein put it, "God is the ocean and we are the waves." For a moment it may seem *as if* we are distinct, alone, but in the end as in the beginning we and God are of the same.

So teaches Buber: "In their true essence, the worlds [that is, God's world and ours] are one. They only have, as it were, moved apart. But they shall again become one, as they are in their true essence. Man was created for the purpose of unifying the two worlds." And this is the theme of these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe. *Teshuvah*, not repentance but returning (and better yet *restoring*) is our challenge as we enter a new year. To re-unite that which is separate. To become at-one again with the Source of our being. This was the meaning implicit in the Kotzker Rebbe's question to his students, "Where is the dwelling place of God?" But when they laughed at him, "What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world filled with God's glory?" he answered, "God dwells wherever we let God in."

*Esa einai el he-harim, mei-ayin yavo ezri?*

I lift up [both of] my eyes to the mountains.  
Where will my help come from?

*Ezri mei-im Adonai, oseh shamayim va-aretz.*

My help comes from the Maker of heaven and earth.  
My help comes from God. As it always has. As it always will.