

# “The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

## Shemot: Eyes Wide Open

“Living is easy with eyes closed; Misunderstanding all you see” (The Beatles)



At the start of Shemot we meet Moshe who will become perhaps the greatest Jewish leader of all time. Reading the verses that depict his earliest experiences, we look for the ingredients that shaped his formidable potential for leadership; what made him so special? This year I noticed a recurrent theme, more accurately, a repeated verb. It relates to Moshe’s sight:

יָא וַיְהִי בְיָמָיו הֵהֱמוֹ, וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא, בְּסִבְלַתָּם;  
וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי, מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו .  
יָב וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ

“...When Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and **saw** their labors. He **saw** an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. <sup>12</sup>He turned this way and that and **saw** no one about..”

Years later, at the burning bush, Moshe again stops to “see”; the verb רָא reappears several times. This “seeing” attracts God’s attention:

וַיֵּרָא, וְהִנֵּה הַסִּינָה בְעֵר בָּאֵשׁ, וְהַסִּינָה, אֵינָנוּ אֹכֵל  
ג. וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה--אֵסְרֶה-נָּא וְאֵרְאֶה, אֶת-הַמְרָאָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֶּה: מַדּוּעַ, לֹא-יִבְעַר הַסִּינָה .  
ד וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה, כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת

He **saw**, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>Moses said, “I must turn aside **to look** at this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?” <sup>4</sup>When the Lord saw that he had turned aside **to look** ...

### Please discuss these scenes:

- Is Moshe merely alert, curious, observant of his surroundings, or is this “vision” indicative of something deeper?

# “The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

- If you had “seen” the violent taskmaster, would you have intervened? Moshe “saw no man” to assist or protest. Why was that? Why did nobody help?
- If you had “seen” the Burning Bush, would it have aroused your curiosity?
- In an era of smartphones, have we lost our ability to “see” past our screens?

---

As we have noted, Moshe is described as a man with unusual “sight”, with a propensity for a focused visual sense. But what is happening when Moshe “sees”?

Rashi: “He saw their labors: He put his eyes and heart to experiencing their pain”

וירא בסבלתם: נתן עיניו ולבו להיות מיצר עליהם

Rashi suggests that Moshe is far from a dispassionate spectator. He experiences empathy, he feels the pain of the Israelite slaves. This is evidenced by his extreme reaction, lashing out at an Egyptian taskmaster and killing him. I would go even a stage further. Moshe’s emotional connection leads to a response; his outrage becomes a call to action.

And I would ask this question: Does Moshe begin to feel emotion as a result of what he witnessed? Or might we say that because Moshe “opened his eyes and heart to experience their pain” he now “saw” the world in a different way?

In our second scene, at the Burning Bush, the strange sight arouses Moshe’s curiosity. Is he fascinated by the natural world, or does he sense a spiritual potential in this supernatural spectacle? Moshe is an active watcher, perceptive, experiencing events around him deeply. He sees the bush burning but he is intrigued by “this marvellous sight.” The supernatural beckons him. Here his special visual sense communicates a rare spiritual inclination or aptitude.<sup>i</sup>

Where does Moshe develop this special gift of the visual, this focussed power of observation, the ability to let the outside penetrate and affect our inner world? From where does it originate?

Many have commented that the verb “רא” is to be found earlier in the Moshe narrative.

First it is seen with his mother, Yocheved. When Moshe is born: “She saw that he was good - וַתֵּרָא אתוּ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא”. What is this “goodness” that Moshe’s mother sees in a new-born infant? Every mother loves her child! Did she merely see that the child was healthy? Or perhaps that in bleak times, when children were being slaughtered, she passionately believed that this child had a future, that this boy would indeed survive. She exhibited a particular faith and a steadfast determination to ensure that this child would have a future. Could this “vision” not have impacted Moshe?

The second “see-er” is Moshe’s saviour and adopted mother – Pharaoh’s daughter. She also “sees”:

וַתֵּרָא אֶת-הַתִּיבָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף, וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אֶמְתָּהּ וַתִּקְרָהּ. וַיִּתְּפַח וַתֵּרָאֶהוּ אֶת-הַיֶּלֶד

# “The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

She **saw** the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. <sup>i</sup>When she opened it, she **saw** that it was a child, a boy crying.

We observe her curiosity as she spots a strange basket lodged in-between the reeds. She examines its contents and is moved by pure human emotion as she vows to keep this child alive. For a daughter of Pharaoh, this speaks volumes. She is undermining her own father’s regime. She makes her own protest against Pharaoh’s infanticide by harbouring and raising this Hebrew babe. Her “seeing” is indicative of her humanity, her moral activism, and her willingness to pay a high personal price for her compassion. Again, how could this woman’s “vision” not affect and influence Moshe?!<sup>ii</sup>

So, if we may summarise, the key to Moshe’s great beginnings is his ability to open his mind and heart to injustice, to see the suffering of others, to cultivate a spiritual mindfulness and awareness, experiencing the divine in the world we inhabit. And as a friend put it to me, once we begin to see a perspective of this kind, we cannot “un-see” it; it is present in all that we experience and observe, and it warrants a response. Moshe challenges us to tune our hearts and minds so that our eyes register and our souls engage with events which we experience. True leadership begins with “seeing” in the deepest sense of that word.

Shabbat Shalom!

---

<sup>i</sup> Interestingly, Midrash imagines Abraham as witnessing a “palace in flames” and he calls out for the owner of the palace and finds God. This is a midrashic corollary to the Burning-Bush story. Abraham seeks and discovers God amidst the burning.

<sup>ii</sup> A third woman watches Moses. His sister, Miriam “stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him. There, the Hebrew is "לדעה מה יעשה לו". Not seeing but “knowing”. I find it fascinating that as God prepares to save the Israelites, the verse reads: “<sup>25</sup>God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (2:25) אֱלֹהִים נִדְעָה, אֱלֹהִים נִדְעָה; וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל; אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל; וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל. In other words, the two verbs – “seeing” and “knowing” – all indicative of a special vigilance that is animated by human care, empathy and moral principle - these actions that have been modelled by the humans in the story are now adopted by God.