



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

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IN THE PARSHA

## Didn't You See Them?

It is a question that I learned never to ask. I first learned this lesson in my training as a psychotherapist, long ago. I was seeing a gentleman for a number of problems, including his marital difficulties.

Despite the passage of the years, I still vividly remember the evening in which he came to my office extremely distraught. He couldn't contain his torment, even for a moment. Before he sat down opposite me, he blurted out, "She is cheating on me!"

He had discovered incontrovertible evidence of his wife's infidelity. He continued to disclose the fact that bits and pieces of the evidence were available to him for more than a year. Letters, phone messages, unexplained absences, and unusual expenditures from their joint checking account had accumulated and he had been aware of all of them. Yet it was not until that morning that he actually saw what was in front of his eyes all the time.

Strangely, and I only later learned this, he typically shared none of these hints and clues with me during the course of our numerous counseling sessions prior to the day of the big "discovery."

I was a fledgling psychotherapist back

then, and I could not suppress exclaiming the question, "Didn't you see it coming? Didn't you notice what was in front of your eyes?" I was not prepared for his tearful but angry response.

"Of course I saw it coming, you dummy!" He was furious with me for my total lack of empathy. He clearly saw it coming, but he did not *want* to see it. One does not see what one does not want to see, no matter how blatant and obvious the facts are.

The lesson I learned from this interchange was not limited to the field of marital counseling. It is a lesson that I have tried to remember throughout my personal, professional and religious life from that time forward.

I learned that all the evidence in the world will not convince someone who prefers to be blind to that evidence. All the arguments in the world, however rational and forceful they may be, cannot persuade a person who is clinging to his preferred beliefs and who is not open to logic and reason.

In truth, I should have learned this lesson long before I embarked upon a career in psychology. I should have learned it when I first studied this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tavo* (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8). I should have given more serious thought to the following passage:

"Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, 'You have seen all that the Lord

did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt...The wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.” (Deuteronomy 29:1-3)

To paraphrase: “You saw, but you did not see. You heard, but you did not hear. All that you needed to know was before you, but did not have the mind to understand.”

At about the same time that I sat face to face with the betrayed husband who struggled so hard not to see what should have been apparent to him, I became introduced to the writings of a great Rabbi in Israel, who died tragically very young, almost fifty years ago. His name was Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul, and a posthumously published collection of his writings on the Torah portions of the week was issued shortly after his death.

The name of this collection is *Min HaBe'er (From the Well)*, which is a very apt title for a book full of insights drawn from the deepest sources of our faith. Rabbi Bar-Shaul reflects upon these verses and upon the phenomenon of blindness and deafness to the sights and sounds which are prominent in our surroundings. Let me translate some of his reflections for you.

“There is a magnificent teaching here in these verses for all generations and all situations. A person can see wondrous things, true revelations, and yet, paradoxically, not see them...The Almighty, blessed be he, gives the person eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to understand, but it is the person who must choose to see and hear and understand. It is the person who



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must open his eyes well to see, and even then he cannot see unless he also opens his heart to understand. For if a person just sees with his eyes alone, he may react emotionally. But as long as he does not direct his mind to what he has seen, his emotional reactions will fall short of understanding, of knowing...

“It is not for us to have critical thoughts about our ancestors who failed to see. But the Torah here is giving us both a guideline and a warning signal. When Moses tells the people of Israel, ‘You have seen... But you were not given a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear,’ he is calling upon us, today, to think deeply and well about these words and to apply them to our own circumstances.”

So many times in our history, we have failed to see facts that were apparent to those who possessed understanding hearts. Most tragically, all of us who read about the events leading up to the Holocaust find ourselves asking the questions, “Did they not see what was coming? Did our enemies not warn us very clearly about their intentions to destroy us? Were the signals not sufficiently obvious? Why did so few take advantage of opportunities to escape years before escape became impossible?”

These questions haunt us today and will continue to do so forever. Perhaps, these questions are beyond our capacity. They are over our heads.

But what we can learn, in less terrible and less tragic circumstances, is to do our utmost to understand what the Almighty has allowed us to see.

He has allowed us to see, for example, a thriving Jewish state. We must understand its significance.

He has allowed us to hear the voices of children studying His Torah, and the sounds of *yeshivot* greater in size than ever before in history. Our hearts must celebrate these achievements.

We will soon see throngs of Jews all over the world participating in services in our synagogues, and we will hear the sounds of the *shofar* calling upon us to become better Jews and better human beings.

The Almighty will let us see these sights and hear these sounds. We must open our hearts and minds not just to see and hear them but to understand them, appreciate them, and grow from them.

Let us not permit these blessed sights and sounds to be ignored. Let others not be able to ask of us, “How could you not see them? How could you not hear them?” ■

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