

Rosh HaShanah Evening 5779
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Seeing and Being Seen

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When Leslie Jamison walks into work, she is handed a case file labeled “Stephanie Phillips.”¹ Stephanie is 23, and she is seeking medical attention for ongoing seizures. She can usually feel the seizures coming on, but she has no memory of them and no idea why they occur. All Stephanie knows is that they started two years ago, shortly after her older brother died in a swimming accident. Since then, she has spent most of her time at home, afraid to have a seizure in public.

Leslie Jamison holds Stephanie’s file and contemplates the work ahead of her. Jamison is not a doctor or nurse; her task is not to address Stephanie’s medical issues. Jamison’s task is to *embody* them. Stephanie Phillips is a scripted character, and Leslie Jamison is a medical actor. She gets paid \$13.50 an hour to undergo simulated exams at the hands of eager medical students.

For the students, this is both an exercise in diagnosis and a chance to practice their bedside manners. After each 15-minute encounter, Jamison fills out a checklist evaluation of the student’s performance. Which crucial pieces of Stephanie Phillips’ information did the student manage to elicit? Which ones did the student leave uncovered? Jamison knows checklist item 31 is “generally acknowledged as the most important category: ‘Voiced empathy for my situation/problem.’” She and her fellow actors have been told that that first word, *voiced*, is the key. Students can’t just “have a sympathetic manner or use a caring tone.” They “have to say the right words to get credit for compassion.”²

The students knew about item 31, of course, so, in situation after situation, no matter the medical condition or patient’s backstory, Jamison got used to hearing a tired formula. “[*That*] *must be really hard* [to have a dying baby], *that must be really hard* [to be afraid you’ll have another seizure in the middle of the grocery store], *that must be really hard* [to carry in your uterus the bacterial evidence of cheating on your husband]. Why not say, *I couldn’t even imagine?*”³

Playing Stephanie Phillips and numerous other roles—and evaluating the students who examined her—taught Jamison something important about empathy. It’s not, she says in her book

¹ Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams: Essays*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

² *Ibid.* p. 2-3

³ *Ibid.* p. 4-5

The Empathy Exams, “just measured by checklist item 31[, not just] remembering to say *that must be really hard*—it’s figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all.”⁴

There is power in seeing one another. And there is comfort in being seen, too.

Seeing and being seen. These two human experiences go together, and nowhere is that more evident than in the Torah scroll itself. Because its Hebrew is written without vowels, the words *yir’eh* and *yera’eh* can get mixed up. One is to see, and the other is to be seen.

That’s what we find at the pivotal moments of two characters central to our Torah readings on Rosh HaShanah. One is Abraham, whom The Holy One puts to a test of faith in Tuesday’s Torah reading. Abraham is commanded to slaughter his son Isaac as a sacrifice, but a divine messenger interrupts Abraham before he can bring down the knife. Still, the point is made; the Holy One sees that Abraham was willing to give up that which was most dear to him for the sake of his deity. The covenantal promise is renewed. In response, Abraham names the mountain on which the near-sacrifice occurred “*Adonai-Yir’eh*, Adonai sees.” The Torah then tells us that the place becomes known through the ages as “*B’har Adonai Yera’eh*, Adonai is seen on the mountain.”⁵

The other character is Hagar, maidservant of Abraham and Sarah and mother of Ishmael. In what amounts to the prologue of tomorrow morning’s Torah reading, she flees from Sarah’s oppression. In the wilderness, the Omnipresent One hears her plea and promises that her son Ishmael will be blessed. In response, Hagar becomes the first person to invent a new name for the Holy One: *El-Roi*, which means something like “God of Seeing,” or “God Who sees Me,” or “God of My Sight.” The spot of Hagar’s divine encounter, like Abraham’s, also gets a name: *Beer-Labai-Roi*, which means something like “the Well of the living One who sees me” or “the well of the life of my vision.”⁶ No one is sure what the names really mean—the Hebrew is either garbled or archaic—but one thing is clear: seeing and being seen go together.

The rabbis of the Talmud knew this, too. On Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, we are commanded to appear at the Temple in Jerusalem with offerings to the Sovereign of the Universe. The rabbis, talking about who exactly is supposed to show up on those occasions, say, “Don’t read

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 5

⁵ Genesis 22:14

⁶ Genesis 16:13–14

yera'eh, to appear or be seen, but *yir'eh*, to see.”⁷ It’s not just about showing up, but also taking in what’s happening there.

When we gather in large numbers, especially when it happens so few times a year, it’s about seeing and being seen. It’s about hearing and being heard. It’s about knowing and being known.

It’s about connection.

The Days of Awe are our largest gatherings of the year. They are when we greet old friends, find new faces, and notice who is no longer among us. Rosh Hashanah, as a holy gathering and with its characters whose lives hinge on reciprocity of recognition calls out to us: it is time for each of us to see and be seen.

In 1983, the Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded to biologist Barbara McClintock. Early in her career, McClintock became fascinated by genetic transposition, and that passion led her to relate to genetics in unorthodox ways. It also led her to groundbreaking findings: that bits of genes can move about on chromosomes.⁸

McClintock’s biographer, Evelyn Fox Keller, wanted to know more. She asked what enabled McClintock to “see further and deeper into the mysteries of genetics than her other colleagues.” The scientist’s answer was simple: “[O]ne must have the time to look, the patience to ‘hear what the material has to say to you,’ the openness to ‘let it come to you.’ Above all, one must have ‘a feeling for the organism.’”⁹

McClintock had the kind of “precise analytical thinking and impeccable data” one needs to win a Nobel Prize. But it is the “language of relationship, of connectedness, of community,” that she uses to describe her work.¹⁰

As educator-sage Parker Palmer puts it, “Knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know.”¹¹

To see, to hear, to know something or someone is to come into relationship with them. We use words of knowing to talk about relationships all the time. When we start building a friendship,

⁷ Chagigah 2a

⁸ Rosser, Sue V. “The Gender Equation,” *Sciences*, Sept.-Oct. 1992, p. 46. In Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 55.

⁹ Keller, Evelyn Fox. *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: Freeman, 1983), p. 198, in Palmer.

¹⁰ Palmer, p. 55

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 54

we are “getting to know” one another. When we feel betrayed by those closest to us, we might say, “I never really knew them at all.” And in the Hebrew Bible, the euphemism used for one of the closest forms of connection—sexual intimacy—is “to know:” “And Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a Cain.”¹²

Seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, knowing and being known—it’s about relationships.

That’s why, when we feel unseen or unheard, we also feel disconnected, alone.

Earlier this year, writer Cris Beam flew from New York to Wisconsin to apologize to her ex-wife. As she tells the story in a *New York Times* editorial,¹³ they had been together 14 years, when Beam’s ex-wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. Beam stayed by her side through the surgeries and chemo, but she was terrified herself. In her panic, she began an affair with her therapist, whom she later married.

Beam’s ex-wife survived the cancer, and she eventually remarried and went on to have two children. Though Beam had apologized before, the words had not been enough. The wound was deep. So Beam looked to the model of *teshuvah*; she wanted to pair *cheshbon hanefesh*, a personal stock-taking, with seeking forgiveness.

Beam’s ex-wife wanted the space to share her experience, to share how sad she was about the way their relationship ended. And Beam wanted to give her ex-wife this space because, she realized, that was what she wanted, too. She wanted it from the therapist who had broken things off violently, and she wanted it from all the other people in her own life who had wronged her.

In that meeting, Beam felt the deep realization that there was a longing she and her ex-wife shared: not to be apologized at, but to be listened to. If there’s one thing every human being shares, it is the capacity to be hurt. One way to help each other heal is to let us share our stories, to let us be seen and heard. To let each other be *known*.

The funny thing is, it changes us in the process, too. And sometimes it even happens on TV.

My husband Ari and I have loved watching *Queer Eye*, the Netflix reboot the early 2000’s show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The reality show’s premise is largely the same as it once was: five

¹² Genesis 4:1

¹³ Beam, Cris. “I Did a Terrible Thing. How Can I Apologize?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 30 June 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/opinion/sunday/apologizing-apologies.html.

gay men, known as the Fab Five, drop into a person's life for a week and give them a total makeover: wardrobe, diet, grooming, décor, and culture. But that's not really what the show is about; it's about self-acceptance and learning what unites across difference.

In one of the most controversial episodes of the new show, the subject is Corey Waldrop, a conservative police officer who was nominated for *Queer Eye* by his friend and fellow officer Henry.¹⁴

The episode opens with the Fab Five piled into an SUV, driving to Corey's house. Karamo, an African American man and the show's culture expert, is in the driver's seat. Suddenly, they hear sirens and lights and are pulled over by the police. Viewers see the entire Fab Five's mood shift, but Karamo's body language changes most drastically. He tenses up and is visibly afraid when the officer walks up to the car. After a few stressful moments, the officer reveals himself to be Henry, Corey's nominator. The whole thing was a setup—it is, after all, reality television.

Later in the episode, Karamo and Corey share a long drive between appointments. Karamo reflects back on what getting pulled over was like for him. That leads to him sharing what it feels like for him to be a black man whose son was afraid to get his driver's license, because he was afraid of getting pulled over and hurt by the police. Corey then shares his own experience as a policeman who strives to be conscientious about the appropriate use of force but feels vilified. He wishes that Black Lives Matter activists and police officers would have a chance to talk, like he and Karamo are talking, so each could be heard by the other.

The scene concludes with a nice voiceover from Karamo: "I'm open," he says. "I'm not saying a conversation with one police officer and one gay guy is going to solve [our country's] problems, but maybe it can open up eyes."¹⁵

It's fair to criticize the show for manipulating Karamo—he almost quit the show over the incident¹⁶—and for trying to tie up such a complicated and painful issue with a bow in one three-minute, edited scene. But solely to dismiss it as reality TV oversimplifying a complex cultural moment overlooks the profound change that really *did* occur for both Karamo and Corey.

In the months after the episode aired, Karamo has said that he and Corey have become close friends. "We still have some political differences," Karamo said, "but as a whole, I see him as a

¹⁴ "Dega Don't." *Queer Eye*, season 1, episode 3, 7 Feb. 2018.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Ernsberger, Parry. "You Watched The 'Queer Eye' Episode Where Tan Almost Quit & Didn't Even Know It." *Bustle*, Bustle, 31 July 2018, www.bustle.com/p/tan-france-almost-quit-queer-eye-you-actually-watched-the-moment-play-out-without-knowing-it-9034664.

human being and he sees me as a human being. I see him as a father, he sees me as a father. That's why we're texting each other at eight o'clock in the morning."¹⁷

Real-life Corey feels the same. He appreciates that the show gave him the chance to communicate his perspective to a liberal audience, and he wishes that he could do more to facilitate dialogue between members of the black community and law enforcement. And he is glad to have a new friendship with Karamo and the other guys.¹⁸

Corey and Karamo saw and were seen by one another. Their conversation might not change the world, but it certainly changed them.

Seeing and being seen is not about fixing, not about correcting what we feel is wrong in ourselves or in each other. It is about connecting, about being open to the possibility of change and being buoyed by relationship even in times of uncertainty. Sometimes all it takes is an honest, open question—an invitation to connect. This is a gift we each have to offer another.

During these Days of Awe, may we use our gatherings truly to see and hear one another. May we invite one another into relationship, and may we be open to how this strengthens and changes us.

May it be for us a good year, a sweet year, a *shanah tovah u-metukah*.

¹⁷ Flaherty, Keely. "Here's What Everyone They Transformed On 'Queer Eye' Is Up To Now." *BuzzFeed*, BuzzFeed, 2 Mar. 2018, www.buzzfeed.com/keelyflaherty/heres-what-the-heroes-from-queer-eye-are-up-to-now?utm_term=.dqMmoxKm4#.ee2nYdln0.

¹⁸ Allen, Ben. "'It's like the Show Gave Me Permission to Care Again' – Two Queer Eye 'Heroes' Reveal What Happened Next." *Radio Times*, 3 Aug. 2018, www.radiotimes.com/news/on-demand/2018-06-15/queer-eye-netflix-what-happened-next-season-1-neal-reddy-cory-waldrop/.