



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parashat Re'eh 5773

By Rabbi Lisa Gelber

August 3, 2013

"Ball, ball," came the voice from the stroller as we walked down Broadway toward the synagogue one Shabbat morning. I looked around for the ball that evoked my daughter's first word; no ball in sight. "A ball," I questioned? "Ball." My eyes combed the sidewalk, the street, and the shop windows. If there was a ball, I wasn't seeing it. "Are you sure there's a ball?" "Ball!" And then, it appeared, right in front my eyes, there, before me the whole time. The "ball" to which my daughter referred was the light fixture that marked the entrance to the subway. It didn't roll, but it was round and present for anyone able to notice it.

This story comes to mind for me as I read the opening phrase of *Parashat Re'eh*. "*Re'eh*—See, I place before you this day a blessing and a curse."<sup>1</sup>

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (known as the Kotzker Rebbe), a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic master from Poland remarks on this verse,

Commentators have noted that this verse begins addressing an individual, "*re'eh*—see," and concludes in the plural, "*lifnaichem*—before you." Yet, in all of their words I still do not see anything new. After all, wasn't the Torah given equally to every Jew (thus the plural "before you")? But, insight and reflection on Torah is according to every individual's spiritual state. Thus, for each individual Jew, the word "see" has a different spiritual significance, according to that person's spiritual state.<sup>2</sup>

For the Kotzker, what we see and understand depends on how and where we are as individuals. So often, we see only what we expect to see. Next month, on Rosh Hashanah, we will read the story of Hagar and Yishmael, which illustrates this point quite clearly. When Abraham sent Hagar and Yishmael away, she wandered in the wilderness of Beersheva. When she ran out of water, "...she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bow-shot away; for she thought, 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears."<sup>3</sup> Unable to bear the inability to care for her child, she separates herself. God hears the cry of the child, and an angel illuminates the future, telling Hagar that her son will become a great nation. "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink."<sup>4</sup> The message of hope offered by the angel invites Hagar to change her expectations and see what was there all along, the possibility of life sustaining resources.

*Re'eh*, visualize, discern. How is it that we are supposed to see? The spiritual work of awareness that enables us to view the world as a place of potential takes practice and assistance. Sight can be misleading. In the midst of her pain, Hagar sees only suffering until the angel reveals hope. Those of us who live with relative privilege, comfort and physical safety often see contentment until someone exposes injustice. Partnership with God demands that we widen our internal lens and allow our eyes to penetrate what lies beneath the surface.

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 11:26.

<sup>2</sup> Ohel Torah, Parashat Re'eh, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 21: 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 21:19.

We particularly need to improve our sight when it comes to the issue of trafficking. The International Labour Organization estimates that "at least 20.9 million adults and children are bought and sold worldwide into commercial sexual servitude, forced labor and bonded labor."<sup>5</sup> A sex trafficking survivor from Cambodia reports, "they forced me to sleep with as many as 50 customers a day. I had to give [the pimp] all my money. If I did not [earn a set amount] they punished me by removing my clothes and beating me with a stick until I fainted, electrocuting me, cutting me."<sup>6</sup>

Sex trafficking violates basic human rights. Luring a young girl from her home without her consent and with the promise of more opportunity and support for family, violates her health, dignity, security and bodily integrity. This is in direct opposition to what it means to be created *b'tzelem elohim*, in the image of God. To me, it feels impossible to blind oneself to the statistics that show that women and girls together account for about 75 percent of all trafficking victims detected globally with children being 27 percent of all victims.

What we see and understand may be different for each of us depending on our spiritual state, but the responsibility for action in the face of injustice remains. Just as *Parashat Re'eh* opens by speaking (eventually) to the plural, "*lifnaichem*," so too does the chapter conclude with that language, "...*u'shmartem la'asot...asher anochi notain lifnaichem hayom*" take care to observe all...that I have set before you this day.<sup>7</sup> First, we "see," practicing discernment on our own and with the help of angels (friends, family, teachers, and strangers) who help to open our eyes. Then, we act, each of us members of community responding to what appears before us.

A variety of organizations, including AJWS, are engaged with the issue of sex trafficking and provide valuable information and suggestions of what can be done in the United States and around the world. Educating oneself is an important step in illuminating a topic that most would rather not see. What would it mean to make the invisible visible to oneself and to the world? Supporting organizations committed to addressing sex trafficking, in all of its complexity, moves us from what is easy for the heart to see to a deeper truth that makes a difference in the world that we inhabit.

The ball my daughter saw so clearly marked the entrance to a transportation site. A choice to descend the steps represented a decision to move from one place to another. Let us choose to know our own heart, cultivating an awareness that sensitizes us to see with empathy, motivation, wisdom and conviction. Then we will understand how a "ball" can shed light.



**Lisa Gelber** is Associate Dean of the Rabbinical School and Adjunct Lecturer in the Department of Professional and Pastoral Skills at the Jewish Theological Seminary. A trained spiritual director, Rabbi Gelber incorporates mindful, compassionate listening into her work and everyday life. Editor of numerous works on domestic violence in the Jewish community, Lisa was most recently featured in "I Believe You: Faiths' Response to Intimate Partner Violence." A marathon runner who utilizes running as spiritual practice and ardent supporter of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, Lisa lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her daughter. Lisa can be reached at [auntie2mommy@gmail.com](mailto:auntie2mommy@gmail.com).

<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organization, ILO global estimate of forced labour: results and methodology (2012) p.13.

<sup>6</sup> "Global Sex Trafficking Fact Sheet," *Equality Now*. Available at <http://www.equalitynow.org/node/1010>.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 11:32.

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45 West 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 • t 212.792.2900 • f 212.792.2930 • e [ajws@ajws.org](mailto:ajws@ajws.org) • [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)