

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Re'eh 20 "I See"

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. Next Shabbat, God willing, we'll have our first Shabbos service at shul since the outset of Covid. I hope everyone received our email announcement last week. We will be sending another email soon with details about next Shabbat and the High Holidays, so stay tuned.

This week's Parsha is a fitting prelude to the High Holidays. For one thing, it always falls within the *Shiva D'Nechemta*, the 7 weeks of consolation which begin on *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat after Tisha B'Av, and it generally serves as an introduction to the *Yamim Noraim*. But I think there is a more specific connection: Parshat Re'eh is where Moshe in Sefer Devarim puts a focus on the concept of **sight**.

Our Parsha begins with a powerful declaration -- *Re'eh, See!* This stands in stark contrast to the two previous Parshiot, *Va'etchanan* and *Eikev*, where we read the words which became the first two paragraphs of the Shema prayer -- *Shema-- Listen!* And "*V'haya Im Shamo'a*" *This will take place if you listen...*" Why the difference?

The Zohar explains that seeing and hearing are not simply different sensory modes; they influence the content of our perceptions. Vision is related to *hashagacha/overview*, in which you see the big picture. With speech, on the other hand, you can only articulate and hear one syllable at a time. The Zohar points to the back-to-back alphabetical order of the Hebrew letters ayin and pei, which emphasizes this difference – *ayin, eye* produces a more encompassing perception, so it precedes *pei, mouth*.

The parsha goes on to say that when you enter the land of Israel, “*Vinatata et Habracha al Har Grizim v’et haklala al Har Eival*”, *And you will place a blessing on Mount Grizim and a curse on Mount Eival*. Some of the earlier commentaries, the *Rishonim* ask, how can a blessing and curse be placed on a mountain? Rashi’s interpretation is that this passage means that those people who recite blessings and those who recite curses will stand on different mountains, a procedure subsequently implemented when the Jews entered Israel, and which was commanded later on in the Book of Devarim, in Parshat Ki Tavo. But the Ramban posits that God’s declaration refers to an idea, not an event. God is declaring, *I’m setting before you a choice: a **path** of blessing and a **path** of curse*. As we’ve explained before, this opportunity to choose one’s path in life is at the heart of the Yom Tov of Rosh Hashana.

The Rambam, at the outset of his monumental work, Hilchot Teshuva, Perek 2, speaks about doing teshuva on individual negative **actions**. But in Perek 5 he uses the first words of Parshat Re'eh – *Re'eh, See, that I place before you a blessing and a curse*, to discuss a 2<sup>nd</sup> type, a more encompassing form of teshuva, in which we choose our path, **our vision of life**, which is a broader way of looking at teshuva. The distinction lies in whether you focus on **which actions you take**, or on **who you are as a person**.

I think that Re'eh serves as a wonderful introduction to Rosh Hashana, teaching us that Rosh Hashana is a time of vision, a time to see what kind of person you want to be in your mind's eye, a time to set your ideal potential for the year to come. Unfortunately, most of us let Rosh Hashana go by without taking full advantage of this unique opportunity. We are much more accustomed to focusing on our behavior, and it takes a lot of contemplation to grasp the full meaning of this type of teshuva, in which we choose our path in life. It is true that in many ways, Rosh Hashana will not be the same this year due to Covid-19. But if we are able to heed the message of our Parsha as we approach the *Yamim Noraim*, we can still make this the most meaningful and effective High Holiday season we've ever had. Shabbat shalom.