



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Seeing is believing

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Re'ei

## Seeing is believing

The microscope was a great invention – showing us so many creatures that can not be seen by the naked eye - but interesting enough, to Kosher observing Jews, the microscope brought many challenges.

In this week's Torah portion, we learn about all the animals, birds and fish that are kosher to eat. And with regards to fish, the Torah (Devarim 14:9) tells us explicitly, "This you shall eat from all that is in the water. Everything that has fins and scales you shall eat, and everything that does not have fins and scales you shall not eat—they are impure to you."

This means basically that any sea or water creature that isn't a fish isn't kosher—turtles, octopuses (or octopi, for those you who want to be grammatically correct), lobsters, shrimp, and dolphins, for starters. And even some fish aren't kosher either, like sharks, which have fins but no scales.

As a matter of fact, the next verse continues, "And all swarming things among the birds are impure to you," meaning that water creatures that are not fish are also considered "swarming things." Now what's a swarming thing? Anything that swarms, creeps or crawls, whether on land or under the water—and any swarming thing is not kosher.

So this brings us back to the microscope.

In 2004, the news spread that copepods [pronounced KO-peh-pods] were found in the city drinking water.

Copepods are tiny crustaceans that can be found in many natural bodies of water. Some of them can grow up to two millimeters long, but most of them are so small you can't see them without a microscope.

But even though they are that small, they still have a head, a stomach, legs and antennae. They look like monsters.

When the news hit New York that there were microscopic creatures in the drinking water, the Jews of New York had a problem: Can you drink New York City tap water? There was a huge debate among the rabbis.

Most rabbinical authorities in halachah, Jewish law, ruled that any creature in your drinking water—or food, for that matter—that is too small to be seen by the unaided eye is not forbidden in any way, since the Torah was given well before there was any such thing as a microscope. And so, if you can't see it, there's no prohibition involved.

As the well-known saying of the Sages goes: "The Torah was not given to the Ministering Angels." This means that a human being is not an angel, and therefore he only has to be careful about what he is capable of seeing, but not more. So we don't need to check our food and water under a microscope at all, because once you start with that, you'll find microbes, bacteria like E. coli and other living and definitely non-kosher things. As a matter of fact, with each breath we take, we inhale and exhale all sorts of microscopic creatures, so determining what is kosher based on what we cannot see would make keeping kosher virtually impossible.

But a big part of the debate over the copepods in New York's drinking water was the definition of "visible." Is a dot in the water enough to be considering "seeing something"? Or do you need to actually see the thing swimming and moving, alive and kicking?

Some rabbis held that if you only see a tiny dot for something that under a microscope is clearly a living creature with body parts and all, that's already enough to be considered non-kosher.

But the most interesting thing about these rabbis' deliberations, opinions and verdicts is that if you read them, each one starts off something like this: "When I first heard about this issue, I thought that it should be permissible because it's not something you can see, and halachah states that if you can't see it, it's fine. But later, when I looked at it through a microscope, I immediately changed my mind; it is certainly forbidden to consume..."

In other words, when a person only hears about something, he's still not yet sure about it. But when he sees it, then it's a whole other story altogether.

And here, my friends, we see the truth in the saying, "Seeing is believing." Or, as the Sages said long ago, "Hearing does not compare to seeing." There's a difference between when you hear about something or if you see it yourself.

For example, if someone hears what sounds like an airplane, and someone tells him that the sound that he heard was really the static of a radio, he can't argue with him, because he only heard, not saw, and he's not sure where the sound came from.

However, if he saw the plane fly over his house himself, then no one will be able to convince him that the sound that he heard was not that of an airplane.

In Judaism, we find this difference too.

There are two levels at which a Jew can observe the Torah and mitzvos: Belief and knowledge. Let's examine these.

Belief means that a person keeps the Torah because he believes it. He doesn't understand it. He's not convinced about it. But he does it because he heard that you're supposed to believe it. He doesn't have any inspiration about it. But he keeps it out of habit.

The higher level is knowledge. At the level of knowledge, one not only understands that he should keep the Torah, but practically sees with his very eyes the importance of keeping the Torah and mitzvos. He sees the urgency and importance of it, and he's so sure of it that it's as if he is literally seeing something physical. In other words, it's an established fact to him in such a way that debate has no relevance whatsoever.

Now we see these two levels in the Torah. For example, in the Talmud, whenever a Sage wishes to present a proof, the text states, "Ta shma"—"come and hear." In the Zohar, however, whenever a Sage wishes to present a proof, the text states, "Ta chazi"—"come and see."

Why the difference? Because in the Talmud, which is part of the revealed part of the Torah, one perhaps may understand it well because it deals with physical objects that everyone can touch and feel. But that is at the level of "hearing"—meaning, at that level, one does not have the conviction that this is how it is and not any way otherwise. Because you're dealing with monetary matters in which you do not openly see G-d.

In Kabbalah, in the hidden part of the Torah, however, while one may not always understand it—but it's at the level of seeing, which, as we mentioned, is far beyond hearing. In other words, when one studies Kabbalah, the concept that there is a G-d becomes your only reality, and becomes something that you practically see and can't be convinced otherwise.

At that level, nothing will get you to change your mind. Your Judaism is unshakeable.

In Jewish history, the first time the Jewish Nation physically saw spirituality was at the Giving of the Torah. Shmos 20:15 tells us, "And all the people were seeing the thunder," on which Rashi comments, "They saw that which is heard, which is impossible to see in any other situation." And one of the explanations of this statement is that when there was such a revelation of spirituality that made G-d so real to them, it was as if they were actually seeing Him with their physical eyes—meaning, "they saw in their hearts and sensed with all their limbs and tendons that it was true and that there is nothing besides Him."

And this, my friends, is the mission of the Jew.

A Jew starts his spiritual journey by hearing: He heard about G-d. He heard about Torah. But that's it. But as he grows in years and in Judaism, he starts to see those things more.

What does that mean? It means that everyone has mitzvos that he or she does in a way of seeing. For example, like circumcision, or the bris. Most Jews, regardless of background, give their infant sons circumcisions—it is clear to them that they will give their sons a bris without any questions. It does not interest them why the bris needs to be done; they do not seek explanations because for them, it is at the level of "Ta chazi," the level of seeing—and when you see something, it doesn't matter whether you understand it or not. It's just there.

(For example, it's like seeing an airplane fly. Most of us don't understand how this huge piece of metal called a 747 can fly, but we see it fly.)

But then there are mitzvos that one does at the level of hearing. For example, a Jewish person may have heard that you're not allowing to talk in the middle of davening. One may even understand this prohibition well. But still, this person talks during davening. Why? Because he only "hears" this prohibition. He doesn't "see" it.

So now we come to this week's Torah portion.

At the very beginning of the portion, G-d says to the Jewish Nation, "Re'ei anochi nosein lifneichem hayom brachah ooklalah"—"Behold, I place before you a blessing and a curse."

So G-d starts the Torah portion by requesting a relationship with us—and by requesting that this relationship be one that is on the level of seeing.

In our world today, when we want to describe a couple, a husband and wife, who love each other as they should, we say "they are like a pair of doves."

Why? I once heard a rather cynical explanation, actually: Because every day another one is sent flying out the window.

But in all seriousness, the real reason we compare a loving husband and wife to a pair of doves is because doves look each other right in the eyes—and this is the way to forge a loving relationship.

As we see in today's world, when two people start a relationship, they might first start their acquaintance by e-mails. Then they might proceed to phone calls. But to really love one another, that's only possible by seeing each other—because only by seeing each other can they possibly begin to truly love each other.

It is this wonderful idea that the Alter Rebbe, describes in his Likutei Torah using the analogy of a king. And I quote: "It is like a king who usually sits in his inner chambers but at the time of his joy he reveals and makes himself seen, and seeing him triggers the love [of his subjects for him], like the love for a king that comes by seeing his face, through which the king comes to appreciate his subjects' love for him—unlike hearing about the king from afar, which falls into the category of fear, not love. And this is [the meaning of the verse] 'Your eyes are doves'—they are like the doves that gaze upon each other, which is their pleasure."

And so we compare a loving couple to a couple of doves, because they are constantly looking at each other.

Indeed, the Jewish Nation is compared to the dove, because we need to love each other and to love G-d. As a matter of fact, all of life is one long journey, a rite of passage from the level of hearing to the level of seeing, from the level of fearing G-d and doing the mitzvos just because G-d said to do them and not understanding why to do them to the level of doing them out of love for G-d—the level of seeing and knowing G-d.

And thus, let us hope and pray that we merit the coming of Moshiach, when “all flesh will see together that the Mouth of G-d has spoken,” at the level of “seeing eye to eye,” and all of the Jewish Nation will return to the Holy Land as the Prophet Yeshaya (60:8) says, “Who are these that fly like a cloud and like doves to their cotes?”

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