

SEEING THE GOOD OF ISRAEL

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The focus of much of the closing Torah readings in Deuteronomy is on the forthcoming conquest of the homeland. Perhaps we get a little weary of the subject, but it stays with us, in the Torah and also in the daily press just about every day.

The sad thing about the closing chapters of the Torah is that Moses, the central figure, will never enter the land of his visions. I suppose no human being ever does, at least not in this life. But Moses makes only a modest request. All he asks for is a glimpse, a brief look:

I besought the Lord at that time, saying: Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land [eretz hatova] that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill country, and Lebanon.

But the Lord was wroth with me, and hearkened not unto me: and the Lord said unto me: 'Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto Me of this matter. But charge Joshua, and encourage him, and strengthen him; for he shall go over before this people, and he shall cause them to inherit the land which thou shalt see' (Deut: 3:23-28).

Thus Moses declares that he wants to see the "good land," that he has never seen. All he can do is see a part of Eretz Yisrael from the heights of Mount Nebo. One commentary remarks that what Moses saw was not simply the land, but rather the *good land* or more precisely, the "good in the land." In the earlier story of the Spies and their Report (Num. 13-15), the text specifies that they traveled through the land and saw *ha'ra'ah* [the bad in it]. Now, Moses was able to see it differently. He saw the good in the land. That kind of vision is what is asked of our readers, especially during these difficult days. We have to keep seeing the wonderful good that permeates the real land of Israel.

In one of his books, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about three kinds of seeing – the aesthetic, the moral and the religious. Aesthetic beauty can be found in

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many places. When we visit an art gallery, or a museum that displays the artifacts of history, we may observe beauty. Our country is full of beautiful scenery, and aesthetic events that can take us by surprise. I have a friend who endured four years in a Nazi concentration camp. He used to say that one thing kept him alive: When he had to go out to work at forced labor, his group would pass several farms. The sight of the farmers working their land thrilled him. Like all the others, he was a starving prisoner, yet the sight of the farms was to him the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. He swore that if he survived the camps, he would make a garden for himself. He did survive, and he did make the garden.

Heschel also spoke of seeing moral beauty – the beauty of a kind deed. The beauty of watching a gentle nurse at work, and of a sign on a hospital bulletin board inviting relatives and visitors of the patients to spend the Sabbath with a family that lives close to the hospital.

Finally, Heschel spoke of a third category – religious seeing. It is not wholly clear what he meant. Perhaps, something like what we mean when we say about some event that "there is more to it than meets the eye. Do not take ordinary reality as the last word. There is always more." Or, to some philosophers, religion is about what might be called a "leap of faith," that bridges the gap between the ordinary and a higher or deeper kind of experience, as when a person stops heavy thinking and rationalizing and begins seeing with a kind of inner eye. Perhaps that true vision, inner vision, requires more than the eye. It takes the whole person.

Now, to return to Moses and that *good land* that he saw. What kind of good land is it? It is full of rocks and hills. It has plenty of enemies, and wars now and then. It is often hot. There is never enough water. If Israel is to be a *good land*, you have to see it with a heart of love, faith and courage.

In a religious life, in Jewish life, the three stages of seeing and experiencing are with us all the time. When something aesthetic is pleasing to the senses, we enjoy it. There is nothing we have to say or do; just enjoy. Be glad and say thanks. It is in the religious stage that we might see larger possibilities for our lives, and then try to live by the consequences for that vision. In order to see the "good of the land" it helps to look with a willing eye of faith. As it is written in Proverbs: *Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint* [29:18]. They may miss the best things that life offers.