

Seeing the World Through Whale Eyes
Rabbi Leora Kling Perkins
Yom Kippur Afternoon 5782
September 16, 2021

A video posted on the New York Times Opinion page¹ starts with the following question: Is the red dot inside or outside the white box? A series of faces are shown on the screen, all people who are being asked this question. At the same time, we see the image they are presented with: a white box.

The people look confused. A woman who we later learn is the filmmaker's mother says "I do not see a red dot." A man who we learn is the filmmaker's brother says, "There is no red dot!"

The filmmaker says, Ok, we'll do it again. Is the red dot inside or outside the white box? The image then shifts, and now we see a red dot on a black screen.

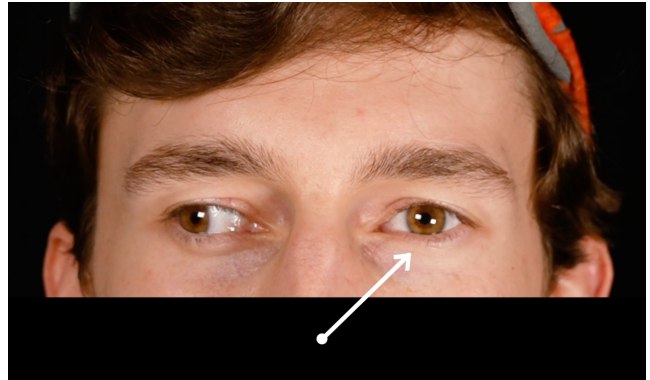
The people being interviewed again have puzzled looks, but then, two images show up on the screen, one after the other: the dot, then the box, then the dot, then the box. Now at this point, the people watching the film may be quite confused, but for the people being interviewed, something

1

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007778961/strabismus-vision-disability-relations-hips.html>

clicks. “Oh, I see what you’re doing,” the brother says. The mother laughs kindly, “Is this what it’s like for you? Oh, God!”

The filmmaker is James Robinson, and he has a condition that causes his eyes to not work together.



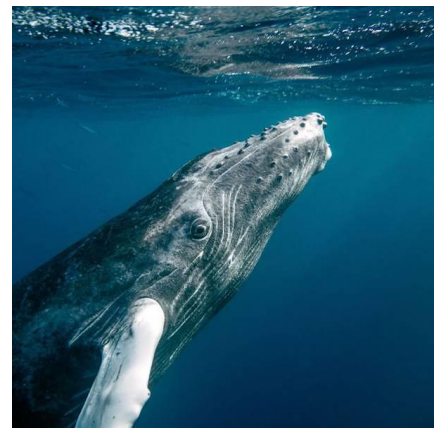
For most of us, we see separate images with each of our eyes, and our brain combines them into one 3-dimensional image: that’s how we’re able to perceive depth. For James, however, his brain cycles back and forth, seeing through first one eye, and then the other, and then back to the first. As a result, not only can he not see depth, but people looking at him can’t tell what he is looking at, because his eyes are looking in different directions from each other. For most people, this is quite disconcerting to watch-- and James knows it. He’s gone through his entire life with people being uncomfortable around him, hesitant to look him in the eye.

James has spent an enormous amount of time trying to understand how other people see, and trying, without success, including through two failed surgeries, to make his eyes function the way other peoples’ do.

In making this video, however, James had a different goal. He says: “We put so much time and effort making sure that people who are perceived as different understand what it would be like if they were normal. But we rarely ever do the opposite: Pushing those who see themselves as normal to understand what it would be like if they were different.”

James calls his eyes “whale eyes” because people love to look at whales, and we’re completely unbothered by the fact that we can see only one of their eyes at a time. He wishes that people could look at him the same way. “In all honesty, I don’t have a problem with the way that I see. My only problem is with the way that I am seen.”

A whale, or perhaps, a big fish, features in our Haftarah reading this afternoon, and like the whale in James Robinson’s metaphor, this sea creature, too, serves as an attempt to help someone gain a new perspective on the world.



Before he was swallowed by a whale, Jonah the prophet doesn’t even try to imagine what it is like to be another person. His behavior seems consistently self-involved. Jonah has a rigid world-view in which people need to be punished for bad behavior, full stop. For him, repentance is no reason to withdraw a punishment. Therefore, when God wants Jonah to

prophecy to the people of Nineveh, Jonah doesn't want the people to have the chance to escape punishment, so he simply doesn't go, even though the lives of a whole city's worth of people hang in the balance. Then, when the boat that Jonah is on nearly capsizes due to a storm that is occurring because of him, Jonah takes possibly the most callous route. Instead of promising God to go to Nineveh, he decides that the solution is for him to drown. After all, Jonah believes that sinners should be punished, and Jonah has just sinned by disobeying God's command. And instead of jumping overboard himself, he causes the sailors immense moral distress by insisting that they physically throw him into the water, thus leading them to think that they had caused his death.

When the whale comes along and sweeps Jonah up, Jonah has a chance to change his outlook -- he, **like the people of Nineveh**, has disobeyed God's command. Jonah, a believer in pure justice, wanted God to simply punish the disobedient people, and presumably, he believed that he deserved to be killed by God in the storm as a punishment for refusing to follow God's command. However, God chooses to spare his life, and sends him a whale to give him a second chance. Perhaps, God hopes, Jonah will be grateful for God's mercy in giving him another opportunity to right his initial wrong. Perhaps he will come to think that the people of

Nineveh, too, should have the chance to change their behavior and to avoid punishment.

Following his time in the whale, Jonah *does* change his behavior. He realizes that he can no longer blithely ignore God's call-- so he turns around, goes to Nineveh, and shares with them God's call to repent.

However, even though he performs the necessary motions, it's clear that in fact, his heart is still not in it. That internal transformation God may have hoped for has not occurred.



When God spares the lives of the people of Nineveh, Jonah is so distressed that he says he would rather die than live. Finally, at the end of the story, God, perhaps at a loss in figuring out how to change Jonah's attitude, explicitly shares the message that Jonah has had such a hard time learning-- about the importance of caring for others.

God says "Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" God is asking Jonah to look more closely at the people whom Jonah would have

condemned to death. They made mistakes, God says. So they acted badly. But they didn't know any better! And, as we saw through their prompt actions-- they were able and willing to learn and to change!

At the end of the book of Jonah, God's message is, essentially, to have an understanding of the limitations of the people of Nineveh. God depicts them as immature, as "not knowing better." God doesn't actually ask Jonah to put himself in the people's shoes, but he does ask him to understand that they deserve care and empathy.

James Robinson, **does** want people to put themselves in his shoes. He wants people to attempt to understand what it *feels like* to be him, and then to consciously try to overcome the sense of awkwardness and discomfort that they feel when they look him in the eye.

That is a much bigger ask. That ask may be too great for Jonah, as caught up as he is in himself. It might not, however, be too big an ask for us.

So how do we go about this task, of seeing the world through other peoples' eyes? After all, not everyone creates a documentary about how they experience the world so that others can understand them. So what is it, exactly, that we can do to understand each other better, and to experience empathy for others?

I believe we don't have to go farther than the book of Jonah to find a group of people who at least have started on this journey of trying to understand the experience of other people. When a divinely caused storm threatens the boat that Jonah is on, the sailors on his ship discover that he is the reason for the storm. Had they shared Jonah's mindset that perfect justice is all that matters, they might have simply heaved him overboard without further ado. However, that is not what they did. Instead, they tried to learn more. They ask Jonah a series of questions. "Tell us, you who have brought this misfortune upon us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?" And after he answers those, they keep going. "What have you done?"

The sailors don't make assumptions. They ask questions to learn more about this person who they don't know, and to better understand his actions. And they don't just ask once-- they try to learn as much as they can, and even then, they recognize that they can't fully understand the situation. They ask God not to hold them guilty of killing an innocent man-- meaning that despite all the evidence pointing towards Jonah's guilt, they still think it possible that he is innocent! Their combination of trying to learn as much as they can, and recognizing that they still don't know everything

is an important step in being more inclusive towards others whose experiences of the world are different from our own.

Jonah is unable to imagine himself in the shoes of others, but the book of Jonah calls upon us to do better, to, as God tells Jonah, have curiosity about people whose experience is different from our own. Jonah's whale is a reminder for us of the need to consider new perspectives on life, and to recognize that the world looks different through each individual set of eyes. May we all be blessed, in the year to come, to better understand the experiences of those around us, and, likewise, to ourselves be seen.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.