

Seeing and perceiving are two very different things. Sight, like the other 4 senses, is a purely physical act – sensory receptors responding to basic stimuli. Perception is the process through which these sensations are interpreted. The American philosopher and psychologist William James said, “Whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind.” In our parashah 12 tribal leaders are sent out to scout the land. They all see that it is a land “flowing with milk and honey,” full of abundance and capable of supporting life. Their eyes also tell them that the land is inhabited, and that there are large, fortified cities. Everyone’s eyes are working properly. But 10 of the scouts perceive what they see as evidence of certain defeat. In their “mind’s eye” danger lurks everywhere in this vast land that consumes its inhabitants, who are all, of course, powerful men. They even see giants there. “In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.” (13:33) Please read this sentence closely. They see themselves as small and defenseless, and assume that the inhabitants of the land see them the same way. Their vision of impending doom spreads amongst the people, and once again they long for the familiarity of slavery in Egypt, this time actually threatening mutiny. They all had seen the great nation of Egypt brought low by the series of plagues HaShem unleashed upon its inhabitants, and they had also witnessed Egypt’s mighty army drowning helplessly in the Sea of Reeds. Have they forgotten the song they sang there? That HaShem’s power brought terror and dread to the people of Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Canaan? (Exodus 15:14-16) Why do they assume that everyone is bigger and stronger than they are? Our Haftarah portion reveals something quite the opposite: Rehab tells the men she is hiding that the people of Jericho are terrified of the Israelites because they have seen all the miracles HaShem has done for them, and they know that they have no chance. Why are the Israelites so deathly afraid of moving forward? After all, HaShem has brought them this far, and continues to protect them.

It is precisely because of HaShem’s protection that this group of ex-slaves is so fearful of finishing what they set out to do – they are afraid of growing up! Life is good when we are living under our parents’ roof. We might not like their rules and regulations, and sometimes we rebel against them. But after the temper tantrums subside, we usually acquiesce, realizing that we are not yet ready to be on our own. Eventually though, we do grow up and assume the responsibilities of adulthood. Of course, we make mistakes along the way, but we learn, however painfully, that with the freedom of adulthood comes a whole host of rules and regulations that can get us into even more trouble than the punishments our parents imposed on us. Right now, the people have no worries. They eat manna (and complain about it like children), they have leaders to tell them what to do (and rebel against them like children), and they enjoy the constant presence of HaShem. But arriving in the Promised Land means they will be leaving the nest. They will have to take on the adult responsibilities of forming an infrastructure, planting and harvesting crops, maintaining security, and so many other things that will demand their attention and challenge them. In short, they will have to constantly make decisions and deal with the consequences. It certainly won’t be easy, and they will – and do – make mistakes. No wonder they want to go back to their old life in Egypt! They have had precious few adult role models, so how can they understand what being an adult entails? They have commandments, complete with explanations and examples to help them build and maintain a society, but they simply are not ready to apply them. Their vision is turned inward and backward, paralyzing them, and condemning them to die before they reach their destination. It will be up to their offspring to complete the mission, to enter the “real world” and do their best build a society worthy of the trust HaShem has placed in them. To better focus their vision, HaShem commands them, and us, to make fringes – *tzitzit* – on the corners of our garments. (15:38-41) Looking at them should remind us to observe the commandments and be holy to HaShem, who brought us out of Egypt. We know these words well; they make up the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph of the *Shema Yisrael*, which we (should) recite twice daily. Right in the middle, at the end of verse 39, comes the most important reason to take the lesson of our *tzitzit* seriously: “... and you will not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray.” The root תור means to explore, or seek. “... *v’lo taturu*” – Don’t let your vision be skewed by your fears, your doubts, and your whims. Timely words that are as valid for us today as they were for our ancestors. The “real world” is a complex, often scary place. How do we negotiate our own lives, provide for our progeny, and know which causes to champion in order to help make the world a better place? We just have to look at our *tzitzit*, envision a world in which all are able to live in safety and harmony, and then get to work. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon (Pirke Avot 2:21), “It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either.” Look, see, and act with confidence!

Shabbat shalom!