

"I see what you mean." "I see success / disaster." We have all made these, and similar statements that have nothing to do with the physical act of seeing. If we are blessed to have the use of our eyes, we see the world around us. But there is a difference between sight and vision. Sight is one of the five basic senses, while vision refers to how the brain processes the signals sent by the eyes, as well as its capacity to interpret them based on a multitude of factors. Sight is simply the ability of the eye to see images; vision collects information, not just from the eye, but from all the senses, and filters it through the many aspects of an individual's personality. Sight is objective; vision is subjective. People who see the exact same things with their eyes may reach vastly different conclusions based on their experiences, knowledge, and biases. Today's world offers a multitude of illustrations in the realms of climate change, Covid vaccinations, the war in Ukraine, and the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in the USA. Sight and vision are two vastly different things, and the tragic story of the 12 people who return from scouting the land is a textbook case. The 12 scouts are the perfect illustration of the old story about the two boys who are taken to a stable full of manure and handed shovels. The pessimist complains about the work, the dirt, and the stink, while the optimist happily begins to muck out the stable in search of the pony he knows he will find. Or the tale of half-full / half-empty glass. The optimist sees what is still left, while the pessimist sees what is missing. My then 4-year-old son came up with another idea: "If I don't like what's in the glass, half empty is good because I won't have much more left to drink." Enter the realist, who has the vision to size up the situation and see possibilities others have overlooked. Joshua and Caleb are not inveterate optimists; they are realists who understand that because they are under the protection of HaShem, they can prevail against all odds. But they will have to convince the people to work hard, and most importantly, to work together – a daunting task even before this episode. Ten of the scouts return with reports so devastating that the people (once again) clamor for immediate return to Egypt. After acknowledging that the land is indeed "flowing with milk and honey," the ten scouts enumerate all the reasons why they will never be able to claim it: "However, the people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified." They silence Caleb by declaring it "a land that consumes its inhabitants. ... In our eyes, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes." (13:27-33) All 12 scouts see the same things, but only Joshua and Caleb have the vision to see possibilities where the other ten see certain defeat. From a discussion in the Babylonian Talmud Sotah 35a: "The Holy One Blessed be He, said, 'I intended the land to appear to consume its inhabitants for their own good, but they considered this proof that the land was bad. I intended it for their good by causing many people to die there, so that anywhere that the scouts arrived, the most important died, so that the Canaanites would be preoccupied with mourning and not inquire about them.' ... When the Canaanites were having the mourners' meal, they had it beneath cedar trees, and when the scouts saw them they climbed up the trees and sat in them. From there, they heard the Canaanites saying, 'We see people who look like grasshoppers in the trees.'" Indeed, it would be unrealistic to expect this ragtag group of newly freed, traumatized people to envision the promises they have heard. All of HaShem's miracles notwithstanding, each new challenge infects them with nostalgia for their old, predictable life as slaves in Egypt. The slightest feeling of thirst, hunger, or insecurity sends them scurrying into the comfortable world of their own imagination, a narrow world where they imagine that everyone thinks like they do. Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah portrays HaShem's reaction: "I take no objection to your saying, 'we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes,' but I take offense when you say, 'so must we have looked to them.' Could you possibly know how I made you appear in their eyes? Perhaps you appeared to them as angels." In other words, the people succumb to the fallacy of assuming to know what others think, and with the low self-esteem born of generations in slavery, they have little faith in themselves, their leaders, or even HaShem. It is a monumental task for the few faithful to remain steadfast against the misinformation and fearmongering spreading throughout the camp. The leaders have tried valiantly to offset the naysaying by directing the people's attention to the promises of their covenant, but HaShem makes it clear that the generation of ex-slaves will never be able to grasp the concept of self-determination. It will be up to their freeborn offspring to settle the Promised Land, and because these still must be born, grow up, and have children of their own, the Israelites will now wander in the wilderness for the next 40 years. The accuracy of this decree is proven immediately when some of the people, full of remorse and new resolve, disobey Moses' order to remain in camp and set off up the mountain, directly into the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites. With their childlike limited vision, they do not understand that freedom comes with obligations and responsibilities. The people will have to endure many more growing pains before they acquire the vision, and the wherewithal to fulfill their destiny to become a nation.

Shabbat shalom!