

Seeing Our Connection to Those Around Us

A true story of seeing for the first time something hidden in plain sight.

A few years ago, Jessica and I visited our alma mater, the University of Virginia. We enjoyed walking familiar paths and recalling shared memories, and as we passed the edge of her first-year residence quad, I lifted my eyes and saw and behold! the unmistakable form of a Civil War memorial. Such monuments are common throughout Virginia, but I had no memory of one on University grounds.

Curious, we approached the statue and learned that yes – it was indeed a monument to Confederate soldiers who had died in battles nearby. It bears the ignominious inscription, “Fate denied them victory but crowned them with glorious immortality.”



[Source](#)



[Source](#)

We looked around and were astonished to find ourselves in a cemetery, founded in 1828 and still active today. It contains hundreds of grave plots as well as 67 unmarked shafts, which serve as the final resting place for dozens of enslaved African Americans. Senators, generals, and four UVA presidents are also buried in this tree-lined, grassy graveyard covering more than two-and-a-half acres.

As interesting as the cemetery was, far more profound was the disorientation of discovering for the first time something so big and so close. How had we missed it year after year? We must have passed those graves thousands of times without ever noticing. Apparently, we learned, we weren't the only ones. History Professor Kirt von Daacke has said of the Confederate monument, "I tend to describe it as 'hidden in plain sight.' ... Thousands of students walk by it every day, but it's not really in our field of vision unless you know to look at it."¹ Now that my eyes are opened, I know I'll never be able to *un-see* this once-invisible landmark.

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Thank goodness the heroes of this week's *parashah* aren't as myopic as I was. Their eyes see not only what's right in front of them but also what lies hidden below the surface.

First, Yocheved, mother of Moses. After the Pharaoh's inhuman decree – "Every boy that is born, you shall throw into the Nile" (Ex. 1:22) – Yocheved bears a son. וַתֵּרָא אֶת־בְּנֵיהּ, "And she **saw** him – how beautiful!" (Ex. 2:2). It may have been easier to look away from the child she knew was doomed, but she sees anyway – and his goodness overwhelms her. So she secures him in a *teivah*, a life-saving flotation device, and places him among the reeds. Note that – despite what Cecil DeMille or Dreamworks would have us believe – the little baby does not float down the Nile, with or without crocodiles; rather, Yocheved seems to place him in a very specific place for a very specific reason.

Enter the daughter of Pharaoh, unnamed in our text but called Batya in Rabbinic legend. וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַתְּבָהּ בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף, "She **saw** the basket in the midst of the reeds" (Ex. 2:5); after opening it, וַתֵּרָאֵהוּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד, "She **saw** the boy" (Ex. 2:6). Batya could have ignored the tiny lifeboat or, obeying her father, she could have drowned its only passenger. But Batya *sees*, allowing her protective gaze to fall on the boy she draws from the water.

And when this boy becomes a man, he goes out to his people וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלֵתָם, "And he **saw** their labors" (Ex. 2:11). Moses is like his adoptive mother, undistracted by the trappings of royalty and attuned to the plight of the needy. Moses strikes down an Egyptian he **sees** beating a Hebrew, and he flees for his life. Resettled in Midian and tending his father-in-law's flocks, Moses's eyes remain open. At Horeb – which is another name for Sinai – וַיֵּרָא וַהֲגִהָהּ הַסִּינָה בְּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ – "He **saw** and behold! The bush was burning in fire. But the bush was not consumed" (Ex. 3:2). Moses not only notices the fire but also stares long enough to see that it flickers but does not burn.

¹ Abby Clukey, "Another statue: UVA faces its own challenge in who to memorialize, and how," *C-ville*, May 15, 2019. <https://c-ville.com/another-statue-uva-faces-its-own-challenge-in-who-to-memorialize-and-how/>

And here is where God joins the story. God **sees** that Moses **sees** the bush and calls out to him. רָאָה רְאִיתִי אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי, “I have surely **seen** the affliction of my people,” God says, “and I have heard their cry” (Ex. 3:7); “I have **seen** how the Egyptians oppress them” (Ex. 3:9). God’s eyes are open to the Hebrews’ plight, and Moses the seer is exactly the person God needs to rescue them.

Yocheved, Batya, Moses, and God. Each not only sees what is apparent but also apprehends a deeper meaning. They understand that the system of injustice holding a nation in bondage demands a response, and each acts in their own way. The slave mother positions her child for success; the princess rescues him in defiance of the king. Moses takes a stand at considerable cost to himself, and God – always at work in the world through human hands – devises a plan of mythic proportions to teach the generations a lesson of justice.

Seeing in this way is a *choice*. It requires moral fortitude and the readiness to recognize our connection to what appears before us. This deep seeing is not mere observation but participation, a sign that we are bound together with those around us. As Rabbi Avital Hochstein teaches, “Parashat Shemot invites us to choose vision and knowledge, awareness of our past, and a renewal that connects and opens the door to knowing those around us, even (or especially) when they are different from us.”² This doesn’t mean that we take on the burden of solving the world’s problems ourselves. Even God doesn’t do that! Rather, like Yocheved and Batya and all the rest, we find our way to do our part, to attend to the opportunities for improvement and wellbeing that lie within our grasp.

When Russian invaded Ukraine, Hila Ratzabi wrote a poem called “We See You.”³ The poem’s heart remains relevant today in realms beyond the Ukraine war:

We see you. In our living rooms,
At kitchen tables, as we pack lunches
And perform our morning routines,
We watch, helpless, holding your faces
To our hearts as we tend to the small luxuries
Of the mundane.

We fear from afar
The brutal waste of war
The extravagant arrogance of power.
We rage at the rage of men
Who refuse to see you, or rather,

² “The Choice of Knowledge” (2026), https://mechonhadar.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/HochsteinParashatShemot5786.pdf.

³ <https://ritualwell.org/ritual/we-see-you-ukraine/>

Choose to see through you and thereby
Refuse to see themselves. ...

We tremble with you.
From across the world
We hold you close
Not with thoughts or prayers
But the presence of the heart
A commitment to witness
A dedication to peace.
We see you. We hold you.
We will not leave your side.

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May we not be blind to the monuments of injustice that hide before our eyes.
May we heed the Torah's call to see the deeper meaning of things, and may we perceive
in the lives of those we see our interconnected moral obligation to take small steps
closer to a world of peace.