Seeing What Seems Not To Be There: Thoughts for Pessah

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I recently read of a phenomenon known as “inattention blindness.” When people are focused on a particular thing, they tend not to see anything that interferes with their concentration. For example, psychologists asked a group of people to watch a film of a basketball game and to count how many times team members passed the ball to each other. While the people were engaged in viewing the basketball game and concentrating on their assignment, the tape showed a person walking right through the center of the picture in a way that would obviously be noticed. Yet, when the viewers were later asked about the screening, about 75% of them had no recollection of having seen a person walk through the basketball court. They were “blind” to this interruption in their concentration. They did not see someone who was right in front of their eyes.

Sometimes we miss the most obvious things because we are paying attention to something else. We tend not to see or hear anything that disturbs our concentration.

“Inattention blindness” is a good thing when it helps us stay focused on what is really important to us. It is problematic, though, when it leads us to miss important things that are in clear sight.

I think that “inattention blindness” may serve another purpose. By blanking certain things out, it prevents us from seeing these things for the moment; but when we later realize what we’ve missed, we actually pay more attention in the future.
Pessah focuses our attention on the redemption of Israelites from Egypt. But it also omits certain things from our focus, things that we might tend to miss unless our attention is awakened. These omissions, when we realize their absence from

our attention, actually become more important to us than if they had been there in the first place. Their absence makes us think about them more carefully.

Leaven: On Pessah we see and eat matzot. Matzot lack leavening. We might overlook the importance of leavening due to “inattention blindness.” But if we think about it, we may derive important lessons. Rabbi Yehoshua Abraham Crespin of 19th century Izmir, in his volume “Abraham baMahazeh,” draws on a rabbinic teaching that leaven is a symbol of egotism and arrogance. Leavening represents the puffing up of one’s self-importance. The redemption from Egypt was accompanied by the obligation to rid oneself of leavening i.e. eliminating haughtiness and selfishness. Even as we focus on matzot during the festival of Pessah, we also need to remember the absence of leaven.

Moses: The Haggadah is devoted to the story of the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt. Yet, the name of Moses appears only once, and that only in passing. We focus on the miracles that God performed for the Israelites. Yet, how can we possibly relate the exodus story accurately without having Moses in the foreground? Moses’ very absence from the text makes him all the more “present” to us. We wonder why his name is missing. A lesson may be derived from the near absence of Moses’ name in the Haggadah. The greatest human beings are also the most humble. They perform wonderful deeds and seek no credit. They are not interested in self-adulation or p.r. opportunities. They do what is right…because it is right. They neither seek nor expect applause. If Moses himself had written the Haggadah, he would very likely have showered praise on the Almighty and kept his own name out of the story. And that is the genuine greatness of Moses. The very absence of his name reminds us of the virtue of true humility.

Contemporary Reality and Elijah: The Haggadah focuses on the marvelous redemption of the Israelites in antiquity. It omits reference to our contemporary condition, except to remind us that wicked people in every generation arise against us. As we sit at a festive Seder table, we seemingly put out of mind all the problems we face today: anti-Semitism, anti-Israel propaganda, injustice, poverty, societal anomie etc. Yet, how can we forget that we are not yet fully redeemed, that our world is still very far from perfection? At some point, probably during the Middle Ages, a custom arose to welcome Elijah the Prophet to our Seder i.e. to introduce a messianic theme to the Haggadah. Elijah, the harbinger of our ultimate redemption, is absent from the Haggadah text…but still very much present in our consciousness. A lesson: redemption may come slowly, only after many generations. Elijah’s name is absent from the text as a reminder that the

process of redemption is not readily visible. Ultimate redemption unfolds at its own pace and in its own mysterious way. But our faith is strong: Elijah appears at our Seder and will one day announce the real redemption that we and all humanity eagerly await.

As we focus on the observances and texts of Pessah, we also need to think about those themes that we might have missed due to “inattention blindness.” When we see what seems to be absent, we may find that our spiritual vision increases!

Moadim leSimha.