

Land and See

Commentary By Yanki Tauber¹

"Don't you see?" we insist when the person we're arguing with won't recognize the shining truth that's staring us both in the face. "Oh, I see . . ." we concede when yet another comfortable fallacy is debunked. We may have **five senses** with which to apprehend our world, but somehow, "I smelled it with my own nose" or even "I felt it with my own hands" doesn't carry the authority of "**I saw it with my own eyes.**" What we "see"—whether literally or figuratively—is unequivocally, incontestably real.

"Let me cross over," Moses implored G-d as the people of Israel camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan, "**and let me see the good Land.**" But G-d refused. We all know the tragic tale. Moses, who had taken the people out of Egypt, who had climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Torah for them and returned to teach them the word of G-d, who for forty years tended to their hungers and thirsts, their doubts and complaints and rebellions—Moses was to die and be buried in the plains of Moab, and his disciple, Joshua, was to lead a new generation of Jews into the Promised Land.

But upon closer examination, Moses' prayer was at least partially answered. Moses asked to cross over and to see the Land; G-d refused the first part of the request and granted the second. "**Ascend to the top of the summit,**" G-d said to Moses, ". . . and see it with your eyes; for you shall not cross this Jordan."

Our sages note that all of Moses' achievements are eternal and everlasting. Moses liberated us from slavery, and from that moment we have been inherently, irrevocably free: nations may subjugate us physically, but no force on earth can subdue the Jewish soul. Moses gave us the Torah, and never shall the Torah depart from Israel. Even the Mishkan, the "temporary" sanctuary built by Moses in the desert, was never destroyed (as were the permanent divine abodes built by Solomon and Ezra in Jerusalem), but mysteriously hidden away in an undisclosed place, where it remains intact to this very day.

Chassidic teaching explains that this is the deeper reason why Moses was not allowed to enter the Land of Israel. If Moses would have settled us in the Land, we could never have been exiled from it. If Moses would have built the Holy Temple, it could never have been destroyed. If Moses would have established the people of Israel in their homeland as a "light unto the nations," that light could never have been dimmed. If Moses would have crossed the Jordan, that would have been the end: the end of the struggle, the end of history.

G-d wasn't ready for the end yet. So He decreed that Moses remain in the desert. But He did allow him to see the Land. And because Moses saw it, and because the effect of everything Moses did is everlasting, we too can see it.

¹ https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2259/jewish/Land-and-See.htm

At all times, and under all conditions, **we have the power to ascend a summit within us and see the Promised Land.** No matter how distant the end-goal of creation may seem, **we have the power to see its reality, to know its truth with absolute clarity and absolute conviction.**

We are still in the midst of the struggle. It is a difficult, **oftentimes painful struggle; but it is not a blind struggle.** Moses has seen to that.

Notes

I. *"We may have five senses with which to apprehend our world, but somehow, 'I smelled it with my own nose' or even 'I felt it with my own hands' doesn't carry the authority of 'I saw it with my own eyes.'"*

a. The traditional five senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell) represent only part of our sensory system. Contemporary science recognizes at least eight distinct senses:²

- (1) **Vision** (sight): Allows us to perceive light, colors, shapes, and movement; provides approximately 80% of the information we gather about our environment.
- (2) **Audition** (hearing): Detects sound vibrations, enabling us to communicate through language, appreciate music, and identify potential dangers.
- (3) **Gustation** (taste): Uses taste buds to distinguish between sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami flavors, helping us evaluate food safety and nutritional value.
- (4) **Olfaction** (smell): Processes airborne chemicals, connecting directly to the limbic system, which handles emotions and memory, explaining why scents can trigger powerful memories.
- (5) **Somatosensation** (touch): Includes pressure, temperature, and pain receptors throughout the body, essential for physical safety and emotional connection.
- (6) **Vestibular** sense (balance): Located in the inner ear, monitors head position and movement, maintaining equilibrium and coordinating body movements.
- (7) **Proprioception** (body awareness): Provides awareness of body position and movement using receptors in muscles and joints, allowing coordinated movement without visual feedback.
- (8) **Interoception** (internal sensing): Detects internal bodily sensations like hunger, thirst, heartbeat, and breathing, influencing emotional states and decision-making.

b. These senses **work in concert, creating our integrated experience** of reality. While vision often dominates our conscious awareness, our complete understanding of the world emerges

² Purves, D., Augustine, G. J., Fitzpatrick, D., et al. (2018). Neuroscience (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.; Angelaki, D. E., & Cullen, K. E. (2008). Vestibular system: The many facets of a multimodal sense. Annual Review of Neuroscience, 31, 125-150.; Proske, U., & Gandevia, S. C. (2012). The proprioceptive senses: Their roles in signaling body shape, body position and movement, and muscle force. Physiological Reviews, 92(4), 1651-1697.; Raig, A. D. (2003). Interoception: The sense of the physiological condition of the body. Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 13(4), 500-505.; Stein, B. E., & Stanford, T. R. (2008). Multisensory integration: Current issues from the perspective of the single neuron. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 9(4), 255-266.

from this intricate sensory network that continuously collects, filters, and interprets information from both our external and internal environments.

- c. "I saw it with my own eyes." - Vision plays a dominant role in human cognition and belief formation for several compelling reasons:

- (1) **Neural prioritization:** Approximately 30% of our cerebral cortex is dedicated to visual processing, compared to 8% for touch and just 3% for hearing. This distribution highlights the reliance we have on what we see, considerably influencing how we focus, understand, and assign meaning to our experiences and exposures in the world around us. Studies at MIT's Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences show that visual processing areas in the brain activate milliseconds before auditory areas when presented with simultaneous stimuli, indicating our predisposition to prioritize visual information.³ Cornell University experiments revealed that when making moral judgments, participants were more likely to trust photographed "evidence" over written testimony describing the same event, even when both contained identical factual claims.⁴
- (2) **Information density:** Vision processes roughly 10 million bits of data per second, far exceeding other senses. This massive bandwidth allows for detailed and nuanced information gathering. Research from Harvard Medical School shows that approximately 40% of fibers in the optic nerve (which carries visual information) connect directly to the brain's primary visual cortex without intermediate processing, allowing for faster visual recognition than other sensory inputs.⁵
- (3) **Spatial precision:** Visual information provides highly accurate spatial relationships, allowing us to map our environment with greater fidelity than other senses permit. For example, remembering the exact placement of furniture in a room you visited years ago, with significantly greater precision than auditory details like the content of conversations that occurred in that same space. Another example is eyewitness testimony in legal settings. Despite known reliability issues, testimony prefaced with "I saw it with my own eyes" carries substantial weight with juries, often overriding contradictory evidence presented through other sensory channels. When it comes to navigating to places we are unfamiliar with, we readily trust what we see on a map or GPS screen over verbal directions or our internal sense of direction, demonstrating our natural tendency to prioritize visual information when making spatial decisions.

³ According to a comprehensive study published in the journal "Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews" (2018) by researchers from the University of Melbourne, visual processing occupies a privileged position in human cognition. Their meta-analysis of 25 years of multisensory research revealed that when sensory inputs conflict, visual information overrides other sensory modalities in 86% of experimental cases, particularly in spatial judgment tasks.

⁴ The visual system's prioritization in human cognition is well-documented in "Vision Science: Photons to Phenomenology" by Stephen E. Palmer (MIT Press, 1999), which comprehensively explains how vision dominates our perceptual hierarchy. Palmer demonstrates that visual processing consumes approximately 50% of the brain's resources despite vision being just one of our sensory systems.

⁵ "The Psychology of Visual Perception" (Routledge, 2020)

- (4) **Emotional connection:** The visual system has direct neural pathways to the amygdala (our emotional center), creating powerful emotional associations with visual memories. Trauma victims recalled visual details of traumatic events with greater clarity and emotional intensity than auditory or other sensory details, even decades later. In PTSD research, visual flashbacks are the most commonly reported and disruptive symptom. When participants view photographs of natural disasters alongside written descriptions of the same events, the visual images generate significantly stronger emotional responses, higher donation intentions, and better long-term recall than text alone.
 - (5) **Shared verification:** Visual experiences can often be corroborated by others, lending them a sense of objectivity that more personal sensory experiences may lack. Consumer research by Procter & Gamble found that shoppers were 3.5 times more likely to purchase products they could physically see and examine compared to identical products described only verbally or in written form. In medical diagnosis studies at Johns Hopkins, radiologists reviewing identical patient data reached different conclusions when presented with visual scans versus written descriptions of the same symptoms. The visual-based diagnoses were given with 42% higher confidence ratings.
 - (6) **Cultural reinforcement:** Throughout history, seeing has been equated with knowing in language and metaphor ("I see what you mean," "seeing is believing"), reinforcing vision's cultural authority. The connection between vision and knowledge is embedded in many languages: the Latin "video" (I see) evolved into words meaning "to know" in Romance languages, the ancient Greek "oida" (I know) derives from the same root as "eidon" (I saw), and the Hebrew word "ra'ah" means both "to see" and "to understand."
- d. Visual dominance shapes not only our everyday perceptions but also our epistemological frameworks. In other words, what we see more determines what we believe to be valid knowledge and truth. While beneficial in many contexts, this ocular-centrism can also limit our understanding by devaluing equally important information from our other sensory systems. You might forget what you heard, but it is harder to forget or let go of what you have seen or what you think you saw.
2. *"‘Let me cross over,’ Moses implored G-d as the people of Israel camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan, ‘and let me see the good Land.’ ... ‘Ascend to the top of the summit,’ G-d said to Moses... and see it with your eyes... ‘”*
- a. The commentary by Yanki Tauber reveals several important dimensions of "seeing" in Hebrew thought that go beyond literal visual perception. Two key concepts stand out in the text:
 - (1) *"Let me see"* as a Hebrew idiom

Moses prays to God, *"Let me cross over and let me see the good Land."* This request contains the Hebrew idiom of "seeing" (לִירוֹת - *livot*), which carries multiple

meanings. In Hebrew thought, "to see" encompasses not just visual perception but understanding, comprehension, and internalization. When Moses asks to "see" the Land, he's requesting more than visual observation—he's asking for deep experiential knowledge. This involves a sequential deepening that moves from mere recognition to profound transformation. To understand is the initial intellectual grasp of what is being observed. This includes recognizing patterns, facts, and basic relationships. Comprehension is a deeper level where connections are formed between new knowledge and existing wisdom. This involves making sense of information within one's broader worldview. Internalization is a more profound level where what is "seen" becomes integrated into one's identity and behavior. What is seen and learned now transforms from external information to internal truth that shapes our behaviors, choices, and actions.

The text indicates that "because Moses saw it, and because the effect of everything Moses did is everlasting, we too can see it." This suggests that "seeing" functions as a form of prophetic perception that can be transmitted to others. This form of prophetic seeing goes beyond ordinary vision to perceive reality as God sees it. It represents the highest form of perception where divine truth becomes visible to human consciousness. The idea of "we too can see it" suggests that prophetic perception transcends time, creating a bridge between past revelation and present experience. The prophet's vision becomes accessible to later generations through study and spiritual practice.

There is another Hebrew word found in this parsha that is powerful and holds multiple meanings, and it is relevant to our study of “seeing.” That word is “shema.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-6

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Ve'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha bechol **levavcha** uvechol nafshecha uvechol me'odecha.

Vehayu hadevarim ha'eleh asher anochi metzavecha hayom al **levavecha**.

Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy **heart**, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy **heart**.

The Hebrew word "שְׁמָע" (shema) holds a richness that transcends simple translation. While commonly rendered as "hear" in English, its semantic range encompasses three interconnected dimensions of engagement:

Auditory perception: At its most basic level, shema refers to the physical act of hearing sounds. This is the simplest translation—to perceive sound waves with one's ears. In Biblical Hebrew, this physical hearing is distinguished from understanding,

as in Ezekiel 3:6: *"many peoples of unintelligible speech and difficult language, whose words you cannot understand."*

Cognitive comprehension: Shema extends beyond mere auditory perception to include understanding and internalizing what is heard. This aspect is evident in Deuteronomy 4:6, where Moses tells Israel to *"keep and do"* the commandments, *"for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples."* To "hear" in this sense means to grasp the meaning and significance of what is communicated.

Responsive obedience: Most profoundly, shema encompasses the action that follows understanding—to listen obediently, to heed, to respond appropriately to what is heard. This meaning appears throughout the Torah, as in Exodus 19:5: *"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant..."* Hebrew uses shema for "obey," indicating that **true hearing culminates in corresponding action.**

These dimensions explain why translations vary contextually. When the Shema prayer begins with *"Hear, O Israel,"* it's not merely calling for auditory attention but demanding **comprehensive engagement**—to listen, understand, and act upon what follows. This multidimensional meaning is why the great Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig described the Shema as "not a theoretical statement about the unity of God, but a commandment to **unify God through our actions.**"

The semantic richness of shema reveals a fundamental aspect of Hebrew thought: true knowledge is never merely intellectual but always embodied and expressed through relational action. In Hebrew understanding, **we have not truly "heard" unless we have responded appropriately to what we've heard.**

In the Shema prayer and throughout the Torah, the Hebrew word for "heart" appears in a distinctive form that has generated significant rabbinic commentary. The word *"לֵבָב"* (levav) with its doubled "lev" (לֵב) root has been interpreted by sages as containing profound spiritual significance:

The two chambers of the heart: The Talmud (Berakhot 54a) notes that the double form of *"levav"* (לֵבָב) rather than the simpler *"lev"* (לֵב) alludes to serving God with both the good and evil inclinations (yetzer ha-tov and yetzer ha-ra).

Dual nature of human emotion: Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi in the Tanya explains that the double "lev" represents the "animal soul" and the "divine soul" that exist simultaneously within each person, both of which must be directed toward divine service.

Linguistic significance: The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush Wisser) points out that while *"לֵב"* (lev) typically refers to the physical heart, *"לֵבָב"* (levav) more often indicates the heart as the seat of understanding and emotion.

Numerical interpretation: Kabbalistic sources note that the gematria (numerical value) of *"לֵב"* (lev) is 32, corresponding to the 32 paths of wisdom described in Sefer

Yetzirah. The doubled form (לֵבָב) hints at these paths being fully realized in both physical and spiritual dimensions.

Wholehearted devotion: The Sforno comments that the doubled form emphasizes completeness in devotion—loving God with the entirety of one's emotional and intellectual faculties, without reservation or division.

This double formulation appears specifically in the Shema's commandment "with all your heart" (בְּכָל-לֵבָבְךָ) rather than the simpler form, underscoring that true devotion to God requires the integration of all aspects of human nature and consciousness.

Connecting the Dots

In our study, "seeing" is more than visual perception; it is understanding, comprehending, and internalizing God's ways, becoming our ways. "Hearing" is more than just listening and hearing sounds; like the word "seeing," it also includes comprehending and internalizing, and it goes a step further to include responsive obedience. For you and me to fully appreciate our experiences and exposures in this world, we must integrate all of our sensory perceptions: what we see, hear, taste, smell, touch, sense of balance, movements, and internal awareness. The Hebrew concepts of *lirot* (seeing) and *shema* (hearing) speak to us about living the integrated life; that is, ascending to wholeness. Just as God is One, so we too should live life with wholeness and singularity.

Psalm 86:11 - "Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an **undivided heart**, that I may fear your name."

Psalm 12:2 - "Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a **double heart** they speak." Here, a "double heart" (בְּלִבָּיִם, literally "with heart and heart") represents insincerity and divided loyalty.

1 Kings 18:21 - "Elijah went before the people and said, 'How long will you **waver between two opinions**? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.' But the people said nothing."

1 Chronicles 12:33 - "Of Zebulun 50,000 experienced troops, equipped for battle with all the weapons of war, to help David with **singleness of purpose**" (NIV). The Hebrew phrase literally refers to "not having a double heart" (לֹא לֵבָבִים).

Ezekiel 11:19 - "And I will give them **one heart**, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh." The "one heart" (לֵב אֶחָד) contrasts with a divided or disloyal heart.

Hosea 10:2 - "Their **heart is divided**; now they shall be found guilty. He will break down their altars; He will destroy their sacred pillars."

Jeremiah 32:39 - "I will give them **singleness of heart** and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them."

Matthew 5:8 - "Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God."

James 1:8 - "Such a person is **double-minded** and unstable in all they do."

James 4:8 - "**Purify your hearts**, you double-minded." Here, purity of heart is directly contrasted with being double-minded or having divided loyalties.

Matthew 6:24 - "No one can serve **two masters**. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

1 Timothy 1:5 - "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a **pure heart** and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

1 Peter 1:22 - "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a **pure heart**."

(2) "*Ascend to the top of the summit and see*" as a Hebrew idiom

The second key idiom appears when God tells Moses: "*Ascend to the top of the summit... and see it with your eyes.*" This becomes a spiritual metaphor throughout the text. The physical act of climbing a mountain becomes a powerful metaphor for spiritual elevation that enables deeper perception. Just as Moses physically ascended to see the Promised Land, we can "ascend a summit within us" to perceive spiritual realities. When facing financial struggles, relationship difficulties, or health challenges, one might "ascend the summit" by stepping back from immediate anxieties to gain perspective on the larger pattern of one's life journey. A teacher struggling with a difficult classroom might "ascend the summit" by reconnecting with their original purpose and vision for education beyond immediate frustrations. During times of spiritual dryness, we can "ascend the summit" through observing the Sabbath, studying Torah, and giving generously to those in need.

Tauber writes, "At all times, and under all conditions, we have the power to ascend a summit within us and see the Promised Land." This transforms the historical event into an ongoing spiritual practice—internal elevation that grants clarity of vision. When tensions arise between coworkers, taking time to "ascend the summit" allows a person to see beyond immediate personalities to understand deeper organizational dynamics and find collaborative solutions. A parent frustrated with a teenager's behavior might "ascend the summit" to gain perspective on developmental stages and remember their child's positive qualities and potential. When facing uncertainty about professional direction, "ascending the summit" involves reconnecting with core values and long-term vision rather than being overwhelmed by immediate decisions.

The summit represents the perspective of faith that allows us "to see its reality, to know its truth with absolute clarity and absolute conviction" even when physical circumstances seem contrary to that vision. A person diagnosed with a serious illness might "ascend the summit" to view their condition not just as a physical setback but as an opportunity for spiritual growth, deeper relationships, and renewed priorities. Those mourning a loss can access the "vantage point of faith" to see beyond immediate pain to the continuing spiritual legacy and impact of their loved one. Someone facing job loss might "ascend the summit" to recognize resources beyond material wealth—community support, transferable skills, and opportunities for meaningful redirection. Communities experiencing widespread hardship (pandemics, natural disasters) can collectively "ascend the summit" to envision and work toward renewal and transformation rather than merely returning to previous conditions.

These Hebrew idioms reveal that "seeing" in Jewish thought is not merely passive observation but active engagement with reality on multiple levels—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. The ability to "ascend and see" represents the capacity to rise above immediate circumstances and perceive deeper truths that remain constant despite changing external conditions.

In a world fragmented by division, information overload, and competing narratives, God's call for us to "ascend the summit" has never been more urgent or relevant.

When faced with the complexities of our digital age—where attention is scattered and truth seems relative—we are invited to practice true shema: not merely consuming information but comprehending deeply and responding faithfully. In polarized political environments, we can "ascend the summit" to see beyond tribal identities to our shared humanity. Amid climate concerns and global uncertainties, we can rise above despair to envision and enact sustainable solutions.

The Torah wisdom we've examined isn't merely philosophical—it's intensely practical. It challenges us to live integrated lives where what we perceive becomes what we understand, and what we understand shapes how we act. In our workplaces, families, and communities, we're called to wholehearted engagement rather than fragmented attention.

Remember that Moses' ascent wasn't merely for personal enlightenment—it was to gain perspective that would benefit an entire people. Similarly, our spiritual "seeing" isn't complete until it manifests in compassionate action and service to others. As we face personal and collective challenges, may we cultivate the courage to climb higher, see clearer, and respond with the wholeness of heart that transforms both ourselves and our world.

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, **"What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but text people."**⁶ May we become living embodiments of the integrated wisdom we've explored—people who truly see, genuinely hear, and consistently act from the summit of faith and understanding.

⁶ This quote comes from Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay "The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence" (1966), where he reflects on the importance of living examples over mere written instruction.