



Seeing the Stranger as We See Ourselves

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Regardless of whether or not you enjoy science fiction, James Cameron's *Avatar* series is worth a watch, if only to learn the greeting repeated throughout the movies: *Oel Ng-ati Kam-eie*. In the fictional language of the indigenous Navi, it means "I see you."

The phrase "I see you" is actually a standard greeting throughout South Africa, not in Navi, of course, but in Zulu, *Sawu-bona*. It means I see your personality. I see your humanity. I see your dignity and respect.

How well *do* we see others? So many are invisible to us. The homeless. The disabled. The elderly. The immigrant. Those who fear a knock on the door may mean arrest for them or a loved one.

Our rabbinic sages taught that God created humanity from one person, Adam, so no one can say, "My ancestor is better than yours" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). One's faith, race, ethnicity, or national origin doesn't matter in God's eyes. God truly "sees" each of us and charges us to "see" each other.

How well *do* we see others? Do we see the agony of the undocumented immigrant crossing our Southern border with her child in an effort to escape who knows what horrors, only to be separated from the child she sought to protect? Do we see the anxiety of the young student, worried that ICE will have arrested his undocumented immigrant parents before he gets home from school? Who do we lump together in an indistinguishable mass to justify to ourselves that it is not our concern when "others" are not treated with the same dignity and respect we expect for ourselves?

One of our greatest sages, Hillel, taught, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor" (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a). Jewish history and our family histories remind us of what it is like to be refugees, persecuted and unwanted strangers, immigrants who seek a better life for their children. We are the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of those who sought safety, dignity, and the chance to make their contribution to their new land. *What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor*. According to Hillel, this is the essence of all of Judaism. How, then, do we deny others that same chance, that same right, to be genuinely seen as individuals and be treated with the dignity and respect all human beings deserve?

How well *do* we actually see others? And if we do see another, what are we required to do on their behalf? The answer is also found in our Torah: “It happened in those days that Moses grew up and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens” (Exodus 2:11). Moses was a prince of Egypt. He did not have to get involved. But once he *saw* the suffering of the people before him, he knew he had to help them. Thus, Moses began a journey that led him, and our People, not only from slavery to freedom but to our historic mission to be a light unto the nations, the ethical conscience of the world. The ability to see each individual is part of that charge.

The phrase “I see you” in the first *Avatar* movie marks the main character’s journey from an insensitive tough guy to someone who sees and becomes committed to protecting the shared “humanity” of those who are very different from him.

This is also our journey, our shared heroic undertaking. Our sages taught that we are all descended from a single human being, Adam, to teach that we are all brothers and sisters, created *B’etselem Elohim*, in God’s image, and with equal inherent worth (Genesis 1:27, Ethics of the Fathers 3:4).

“I see you” are three little, but powerful words that can help us transform our families, our communities, our country, and our world. The next *Avatar* sequel, *Fire and Ash*, will be in theaters this winter. Perhaps it can help inspire us to really see those who appear most different from us, and to include them in our circle of caring and compassion as we seek to heal our broken nation and our broken world.