

**DON'T  
BELIEVE  
WHAT  
YOU SEE**



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT RE'EH  
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In what became popularly known as the Invisible Gorilla experiment, Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons demonstrated the phenomenon known as selective attention. During the experiment, people were asked to count how many times a basketball was being passed in between six participants in a video. Twenty seconds into the video, a person dressed in a gorilla costume conspicuously walked through the people passing the ball, banged on his chest, and continued walking through the scene. At the end of the video, the participants were asked how many passes they counted. They were then asked if they saw the gorilla, and shockingly, around 50% of the participants did not notice it at all. When I have informally showed the video to students in my psychology courses, half the class usually does not see it as well.

The experiment reveals that people often miss things that are right in front of their eyes. Because they focus their attention on one thing (counting the passes), they totally miss something completely extraordinary (a man in a gorilla costume). In their book, *The Invisible Gorilla*, Chabris and Simons use this experiment, among others, to make a broader argument about the limits of human intuition. Besides for not seeing things that are right in front of us, sometimes we mistakenly see things that aren't really in front of us. Gustav Kuhn, a professor from the University of London, investigates the psychology and neuroscience behind magic tricks. One trick that he has studied is the Vanishing Ball Illusion, in which a magician uses misdirection to make people think that they saw a ball vanish in mid-air. In his book *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic*, Kuhn provides numerous explanations for such illusions, but what is plainly clear is that people really believe they saw something that didn't actually happen.

As is alluded to in the name of the parsha, Parshat Re'eh is heavily concerned with seeing. The beginning of the parsha is startling in its simplicity: see the blessing and the curse in front of you and choose the blessing. Yet, as the parsha continues, vision is anything but black and white. A running theme throughout is that without intervention, human nature will lean us towards seeing and doing what is correct in our own eyes - *"hayashar be-einav"* (Devarim 12:8). What is necessary, in contrast, is to follow instead what is correct in the eyes of G-d - *"hayashar be-einei Hashem"*, as is emphasized three times (Devarim 12:25, 12:28, and 13:19). The message is clear - trust G-d's eyes and His perspective, not our own perception.

This lesson is embedded in two other instances in the parsha, emphasizing how easily our eyes can be deceived easily by others. First is concerning the false prophet, who will use signs and wonders—magic tricks, if you will—to try and convince us to follow other gods (Devarim 13:3). But how can one know if a prophet is false? If his “magic” leads us away from G-d, it is deception, not reality. Immediately after discussing false prophets, the pesukim continue with another threat to our eyes: if we have a relative or friend who tries to convince us to follow other gods, we cannot listen or follow him. Yet, because we have such a close relationship with that relative or friend, our intuition may be to empathize. Therefore, the pasuk says that “our eyes should not have pity on him” (Devarim 13:9).

As much as we may think we see everything accurately, we often miss important information or see things that aren't actually true. The message of Parshat Re'eh is to acknowledge our own limitations of perception and correctness and rely instead on the wisdom and vision of G-d and His Torah.

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