



***Parshat Re'eh***  
**August 18, 2012—30 Av 5772**  
**See**  
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Exactly 74 years ago from tomorrow, on August 19, 1938, the government of Switzerland covered itself in shame. The Jews in Germany and Austria knew their lives were in peril. Hitler had made it known that the Third Reich was to be *judenrein*, emptied of Jews. Discrimination and marginalization were now giving way to violent pogroms, culminating in Kristallnacht in November of 1938. In that context many Jews wanted to flee for their lives, literally. But the question was: where would they go?

What about Switzerland? After all, Switzerland was close, and it had a proud tradition of offering asylum to the oppressed. From August 17 to August 19, the government of Switzerland held a conference, in Bern, the Swiss capital, in which it wrestled with: what it should do about the Jews?

On the one hand, it had this tradition of asylum for those who were in danger of oppression. Jews in Hitler's Germany and Austria were clearly in danger of oppression.

On the other hand, there was a strong counter concern about what the Swiss called "Jewification." They didn't want too many Jews, which would lead to anti-Semitism. The best way to stop anti-Semitism from spreading was to not let in any Jews. And so, on August 19, 1938, the government came down with its ruling: no Jews, no exceptions.

This policy created a cottage industry of Sherpas who pried on the desperation of Jews by charging them a huge fee to lead them across forests and over rivers to try to enter Switzerland illegally. Over 25,000 Jews sought entry into Switzerland only to be sent back to Germany and Austria to face certain death.

The border crossings and immigration stations were manned by Swiss civil servants and state police commanders, and all of them, to a person, implemented the policy of no Jews, no exceptions. All of them but one.

One man named Paul Gruninger, a state police commander in charge of an immigration check point, allowed hundreds of Jews to come and stay in Switzerland, defying the clear directive of his own government. He backdated records and falsified papers—making their date of entry appear to precede August 19.

When his civil disobedience was discovered, the consequences were swift and severe, all as described in a book by Eyal Press that came out this year called Beautiful Souls.

He was fired. Not only did he lose his job as commander of the state police, he was never able to get another job. No one in Switzerland would hire him for anything. He and his wife were reduced to poverty. As Eyal Press pointed out, Gruninger was seen eating in restaurants all alone, munching on cider and peanuts, the cheapest items on the menu.

He lost his house. He and his family had to live with his in laws.

He lost his good name. He was seen as a traitor who had violated his responsibilities to his country.

He was radioactive socially. No friends.

He was the subject of rumor and innuendo. A common canard—which was later conclusively refuted—was that he had abused his position to extract either sexual favors or money.

The opprobrium was passed on to his children, who were stigmatized as the children of a man who betrayed his country.

Gruninger died in 1972, an impoverished pariah. It was not until the mid 1990s, after thorough investigative reporting by a Swiss journalist who wrote the definite work on Gruninger, that the Swiss government officially apologized to the Gruninger family, clearing his name of the false allegations that had swirled around his actions, and acknowledging that he had in fact been faithful to the values of Switzerland—a noble man acting nobly. Too bad that he was long dead when his rehabilitation finally took place.

Why did he do it? To sharpen the question: why did *only* he do it?

To answer that question, Eyal Press traveled to Switzerland to meet with Gruninger's surviving daughter, a woman named Ruth Rudoner, who was 87 when she met with the author. Press had one urgent question: why?

Was it because he was particularly compassionate? Because he could not tolerate injustice? His daughter said no: he was not particularly compassionate, and indeed there were other instances when he had been state police commander when he did not act so compassionately.

Was it because he was a deeply religious man, and he felt impelled by God to save life? His daughter said no: he was not a particularly religious man. He did not go to church particularly often. He did not talk about God. Religion was not a big motivator.

Was it because for some reason he was philo-semitic? He liked Jews, perhaps because as a kid he happened to have had a Jewish friend or teacher? His daughter said no: he had no affinity for Jews and was not inspired by some close relationship with a particular Jew.

Then why? If not compassion, if not religious calling, if not personal relationship, why did he risk, and lose it, all?

That brings us to our Torah portion. We are in the middle of a lengthy sermon by Moses, beginning last week and continuing this week, urging the Israelites to follow God's laws.

Moses's key point is: *you saw*. With your own eyes, *you saw* God's saving power. You saw the signs and wonders, the ten plagues, the splitting of the Sea, the miracles in the wilderness like manna falling from heaven. You saw it. And because you saw it, because you were there, because you experienced it, you get it at the deepest level. *Ki enei chem haroot et kol maaseh adonai hagadol asher asah*, because it was you who saw with your own eyes all the marvelous deeds God performed, therefore, you are in relationship with God. Therefore, follow God's laws.

Following this theme, the name of our portion this morning is: *re'eh*. See. Seeing is more than believing. Seeing is knowing—biblical knowing, not just with your head, but with your heart, with all the powers of your existence.

Which brings us back to Paul Gruninger. Why did he, and he alone, do what he did? It turns out that all the other Swiss officials who were the leaders of immigration check points had a corner office where they were secluded from the effects of their hard decision to turn the Jews away. They delegated implementing the decision to underlings. When Jews cried and screamed and said you are sending me back to my death, the people in charge didn't see it. Only the subordinates saw it.

By contrast, Gruninger did not sit in a corner office, far away from the desperate Jews. Rather, he saw them. They grabbed onto his lapels and begged for mercy. If he were to say no, he would see their desperation. If he were to say yes, he would see their relief. His decision meant the difference between life and death, and he saw it with his own eyes. In 1939, he wrote a letter to the Swiss government defending his conduct. This is what he had to say for himself:

*Whoever had the opportunity, as I had, to repeatedly witness the heartbreaking scenes of the people concerned, the screaming and crying of mothers and*

*children, the threats and suicide and attempts to do it, could...ultimately not bear it anymore.*

Seeing is more than believing. Seeing is knowing. Knowing deeply.

That brings us to today, Rosh Hodesh Elul. Starting today, and continuing for 40 days, through Rosh Hashanah and culminating on Yom Kippur, each of us has a job to do. Where something is wrong in our life, right it. Where it is broken, fix it. As our tradition sees it, things could be broken in one of two ways.

They could be broken between us and God, *bein adam lamakom*. We didn't pray, or observe Shabbat, or keep kosher, or learn Torah, as best we could. In which case the fix is: pray on it. Pray on it, offer up our apologies to God, and resolve to do better, and then start doing better.

But things can also be broken between us and the people in our life, *bein adam lachaveroh*. Person to person is harder and messier than person to God. If we have hurt somebody else, just praying on it is not enough. Rather, we have to talk *to the person* we are having the difficulty with. Not *about* the person. *To* the person. The Mishnah tells us: If we don't talk to the person, and clear it up directly, our efforts at repentance will not work. Why does the Halakhah require that we talk *to* the person?

Because only if we talk *to* the person, is the work we have to do real. We see in their face another human being with feelings. We see in their face how we might have hurt them. We see in their face how we might even now make things better.

It is Rosh Hodesh Elul, day 1, and we have 39 more days to go. Where do we begin to make our life, our relationships, all they can be? Where to begin? *Re'eh*. See. Don't talk about. Talk to. Look at the faces of the people in your life. See what is written in their faces. Talk to

them face to face. Because seeing is more than believing. Seeing is knowing the work we need to do starting now. Shabbat shalom.