

Through a Glass Darkly: How Visual Persuasion Deceives

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[Published in Tikkun Magazine](#), Jan. 2020

Gracias a la vida que me ha dado tanto.
Me dio dos luceros, que cuando los abro
Perfecto distingo lo negro del blanco
Y en el alto cielo su fondo estrellado
Y en las multitudes el hombre que yo amo.

-- Violetta Parra, Chilean musician and activist

Thanks to life, that has given me so much.
Gave me two eyes that when I open them
Perfectly distinguish black and white
The starry depths of the sky above
And in the multitudes the man I love.

Human vision is a wonderful gift that connects us to one another as well as to our natural surroundings. Yet the manner of that connection is quite vulnerable to manipulation. In January of 2013 a new law went into effect in Israel that regulates the commercial use of photography to sell products to women. The so-called “Photoshop Law” restricts the use of photos of women that have been digitally altered to make them more slender than in real life. Responding to the high rate of anorexia among young women in Israel, this legislation aims, in the words of Dr. Rachel Adatto, a physician who is a member of Knesset, to protect “innocent youth that adopt and copy the illusion of thinness.”

It’s not accidental that Israel was the first country in the world to take such action. Deeply ingredient in Jewish tradition is a questioning of the influence of images. In *Genesis* there is the allure of the apple in the Garden, in *Exodus* the worship of the golden calf. In keeping with Biblical texts, where the Hebrew words translated into English as “image” and as “idol” are often used interchangeably, centuries of rabbinic counsel warn about the deceptive appeal of visual representation.

Yet within Judaism, and in the other Abrahamic traditions as well, such skepticism has often been contested. In the early 18th century renowned Rabbi and legal scholar Tzvi Ashkenazi refused to sit for a portrait. Without his knowledge or permission, the London Jewish Community engaged an artist to paint him anyway, and the canvas hangs today in the London Jewish Museum. In the 20th century even some orthodox congregations have lowered the traditional partition (mechitza) between men and women that blocks them from seeing one another during services. We today may be inclined to dismiss the traditional suspicion of the sense of sight as little more than repressive prudery. I’ll suggest in this essay,



though, that the perennial misgiving conveys a crucial insight. Indeed the pathway from visual experience to belief is commonly an erroneous one: we are deceived, waylaid, captured by what we see.

Let's begin with a caveat: the human sense of sight is of course an essential vehicle of understanding. Not only in science but in literature, poetry, the fine arts, and ethics, seeing helps us make sense of the world. During the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, television brought into American living rooms images of violence in Southern cities that strengthened the case against racial segregation. In the 1960s visual representation of the suffering and devastation caused by U.S. engagement in the war in IndoChina, such as the My Lai Massacre, helped to turn public opinion against continuation of U.S. military involvement. More recently, the use of cell phone cameras to record police brutality has increased critical scrutiny of law enforcement practices.

Notwithstanding these valuable uses, the human sense of sight is often an instrument of illusion. When that happens, these are among the mechanisms at work: 1) interpretation, 2) anchoring, and 3) identification. Interpretation is necessarily involved in perceiving anything at all: seeing is always "seeing as." A tree may be seen as a towering oak by a camper, as belonging to a particular species by a botanist, as a refuge by a weary traveler, or as support for a tree house by a child – the point is that an object is always seen as bearing one meaning or another. Interpretation also defines how we view one another: love, envy, anger, and fear are ways of seeing and interpreting as well as ways of feeling.

Sometimes, though, one interpretation becomes weightier than the others and is joined to the act of seeing in a way that excludes alternative perspectives. For example, swayed by a photograph of my lover in the company of a certain third person, I am able to see my lover only as unfaithful. Or, influenced by a website display of individuals whom I am prompted to see as vaccinated and hence terribly ill, I become totally convinced that vaccination is dangerous.

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REMEMBERING VACCINE VICTIMS

In honor of those whose lives have been lost or forever changed by vaccination.

Flame logo

Four color-tinted portraits of individuals: a child (blue), a woman (red), a woman (green), and an older man (yellow).

When such entrenchment or anchoring of a visually based belief takes place, it becomes all but impossible to call it into question. Strength of conviction may be amplified, moreover, by identification, whereby one comes to view oneself as the kind of person who adheres to a certain belief: “As a conscientious parent, I am opposed to vaccination.” When we perceive the world through the lens of identity, expression of doubt about a core belief may amount to an intolerable challenge to personal consistency, continuity, and self-esteem.

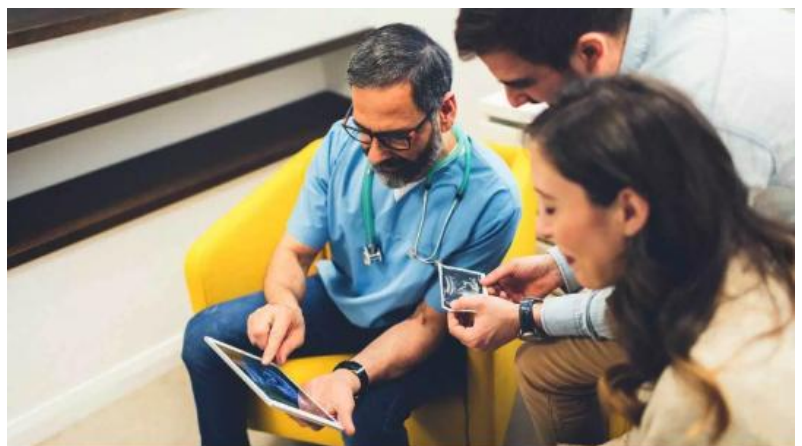
These three psychological mechanisms enter into verbal as well as visual persuasion, and of course any belief they lead to is subject to verbal criticism – a doctor can try to talk down a parent who refuses to have a child vaccinated. Notoriously, though, words may not be sufficient to influence a visually anchored belief. Sometimes it’s more effective to “fight fire with fire” so to speak -- to place misleading images up against alternative ones that tell a different, more evidence-based story. Indeed, persuasion that uses images is everywhere – dominant on Twitter and Facebook, and Instagram trades in photos and videos exclusively. In this environment language alone may give insufficient support to causes we hold dear.

Abortion Debate.

The interlocking of perception and interpretation permits the sense of sight to be commandeered for ideological purposes. Consider for example the visual “evidence” that has been marshaled to oppose women’s access to abortion. In the 1950s, ultrasound technology made it possible to pass sound waves through the abdomen of a pregnant woman and generate a visual “sonogram” of the fetus she’s carrying. These images were seized upon by the anti-abortion movement in the United States as proof that a human fetus, bearing features resembling those of an infant, counts as a full-fledged human person with an inviolable right to life.



Sonogram image, 12th week of pregnancy



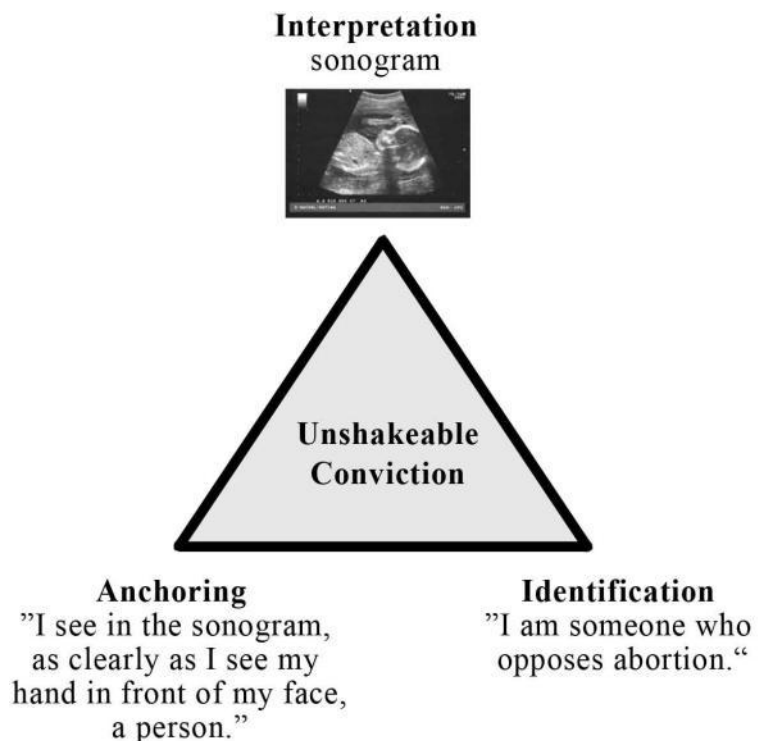
Obstetrician and family viewing a sonogram

Today in many states, ultrasound is used not only for diagnostic purposes but as a means of shame and coercion. Some states go so far as to mandate that every woman must view sonogram imagery before her request for an abortion is approved.

However, although an ultrasound image might *prime* the belief that abortion is the murder of a person with a right to life, it provides inconclusive *evidence* for that belief. Yes, a deep sympathy for human life may incline people to oppose abortion. But those on the other side of this debate appeal, for example, to the rights of pregnant women to personal autonomy, physical integrity, and sometimes life itself; they argue as well that, although a fetus represented in a sonogram resembles a baby in appearance, it does not fulfill criteria or personhood such as the ability to live separate from the mother, or to form intentions and communicate. Hence it's questionable whether sonogram images can establish the case for banning abortion.

Yet they may anchor in the mind a virtually unshakeable anti-abortion conviction. One of the reasons that an image can yield such a long-lasting belief is that visual memory often outperforms linguistic memory. Parents are apt to remember, for example, the sonogram image of their child even if they've long forgotten what the obstetrician said. Research into the ways in which the brain stores different kinds of sensory input confirms the Chinese proverb, "I hear and I forget; I see, and I remember." (The remembering may, of course, be faulty; in criminal cases, for example, eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable.)

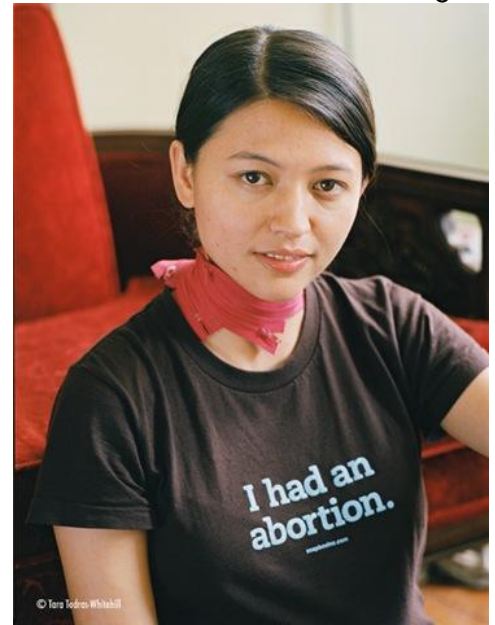
The fetus in the sonogram image does not have the label "person" or "baby" inscribed upon it. That attribution results from an interpretation that might be open to critical review. But an opponent of abortion may view the sonogram as self-evident, indisputable proof of personhood – proof made all the more persuasive when it mirrors and confirms the believer's own sense of personal identity and value: "I oppose abortion and see in the sonogram a fledgling person as alive and deserving of protection as a born child, and remember, you and I – all of us – were once helpless infants prior to birth, deserving love and protection!"



Against this argument, advocates on the other side point out that a woman's right to control her own body also deserves consideration. Sometimes women who have had an abortion make that case publicly and visibly – for example, by wearing a tee shirt that openly avows, “I had an abortion.” Such a personal appeal to a deep value – respect for a woman's right to determine how she lives her life – regards abortion as an ethical choice that should be legal and accessible.

Immigration.

Immigration policy in the United States is no less fraught with controversy than is abortion. Beginning in the spring of 2018, conventional and social media conveyed to the public countless images of individuals and families traveling from Latin America in “caravans” to reach the southern border of the U.S. Some of these images have been sympathetic to migrants:



Others present them instead as threatening:



Public opinion in the United States is very polarized on this subject, with each side finding visual confirmation for its perspective. The coverage at MSNBC, for example, typically features sympathetic portraits and individual plights, while Fox News often represents migrants as innumerable and invasive.

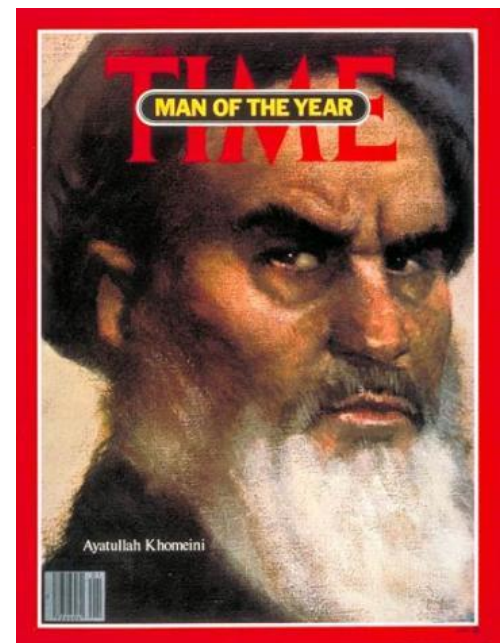
Even if we were all to look at the same imagery, however, that would not necessarily lead to a convergence of opinion. For a single image may admit of conflicting readings:



In this photograph of a “caravan” of Hondurans on its way to the southern U.S. border, raised fists can be seen as menacing – or as a traditional symbol of solidarity among those searching for a better life. The Honduran flag can be seen as the banner of a foreign assault that must be repelled by border agents and a wall – or as a symbol of community that unites and identifies the marchers as they pass through Guatemala and Mexico on their way to the United States. These clashing interpretations frame and interpret experience to shore up what one already believes.

Racism.

In the U.S. the admission of people of color from developing countries is sometimes controversial, and a dense web of metaphors is invoked to strengthen the pathway between perception and anti-immigrant belief. Associations of light with good and desirable, dark with bad



and undesirable are embedded in the English language: smiles are radiant, forebodings dark; light is open and optimistic, shadow fearful and pessimistic. Metaphorically laden in this way, light and dark can be used to convey positive and negative cultural and political messages, even when they disregard actual physical appearance. For example, in *Time Magazine* cover illustrations published in 1979 and 1980, there is a sharp contrast between the complexion as well as the demeanor of the former Shah of Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini. Many photographs of the two men indicate, however, that the Shah's skin color was no lighter than that of his adversary.

There is nothing inevitable about the cultural meaning of light and dark. On the contrary, vision is extraordinarily variable in the meanings it ascribes to skin color. Branches of Buddhism, for example, celebrate the diversity of appearance of "perfected masters," and the "Black Madonna" is venerated in some Catholic and Christian Orthodox cultures worldwide. Jewish universalism too welcomes racial diversity. Nonetheless, in the United States today – half a century after the Civil Rights Movement – political issues continue to be cast in color terms.





White, patriotic, trustworthy – Fox News



Members of the U.S. House of Representatives depicted as Islamic terrorists



Political protest, the image suggests, divides the nation and causes the colors of the flag to run and disintegrate.

But those terms do not go uncontested. One effective way of countering racist and anti-immigrant attitudes is to bring attention to marginalized communities in ways that counter propaganda and stereotypes, with photographs playing a major role. A group of activists calling themselves “The Inside Out Project” celebrates human diversity by posting portraits in public spaces in the U.S and worldwide.



Portraits printed by the Inside Out Project truck upon arriving in Atlanta Georgia



Inside Out portraits posted in Lyon France

Like the “I had an abortion” tee shirts that make women visible who have been most directly affected by the right to choose, Inside Out’s public display of photographs suggests that all the individuals residing in a town or city have a shared humanity, irrespective of their skin complexion or clothing or age. In this way the project helps to make the case for welcoming “the other” and backing a generous immigration policy.

Vaccination.

Responding to a rising number of measles cases in California, state legislators drafted a bill SB277 (in 2016) and SB266 (in 2019) to eliminate the personal belief exemption allowing unvaccinated children to attend school, where infectious illnesses are easily transmitted from one child to another. This legislation was met with a storm of libertarian, legal, and alternative medicine opposition. Critics of the legislation, arguing that the choice to vaccinate or not should be left up to individual families, joined a nationwide movement that uses websites, videos, photographs, buttons, and rallies to cast doubt on the safety of vaccination.



Protest against vaccination in the California Capitol in Sacramento



Vaccination critics invoke the fantasy of a monstrously coercive state.

In response, public health activists fought back with counter-images. When parents opposed to SB 277 came to Sacramento with their children, representing themselves as families concerned for their children’s welfare, pro-vaccination mothers and fathers also brought their children to the state capitol, affording equally persuasive photo-ops, establishing a visual link between the proposed vaccination legislation and children’s health and safety.



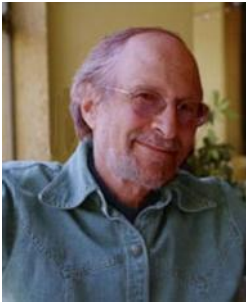
SB 277 public hearing in Sacramento. Vaccination advocates sit in the front rows with their children. Advocates wear blue buttons, opponents red tee-shirts.

Challenging Vision-Based Belief

Persuasion by visual means often results in absolute conviction – in belief that may seem as permanent and inalterable as a starry constellation in the sky. Yet it can sometimes be successfully called into question, in ways that have been suggested above. It's worth noting also that human beliefs become entrenched for social as well as psychological reasons. People turn to mainstream and alternative media celebrities to “paint” the world for them when they no longer trust scientists, public health advocates, and other presumably authoritative sources. Although pharmaceutical manufacturers, for example, reassure us that vaccination is safe, people reasonably ask whether they can rely on what these companies say. Wasn't Purdue Pharma

convicted in court of misleading doctors and the public about the dangers of the opioid OxyContin? To rebuild public trust in the counsel that traditional authorities offer, we'll have to ensure their independence of the interests of wealth and power. That is true, of course, of religious as well as secular authority. Communities of faith genuinely serving the common good can help to repair the ideological fragmentation that currently undermines belief in anything at all.

Religion's involvement in public affairs often contributes today to that fragmentation. But it can also bring people together across the lines that divide them. In the controversies reviewed above, making visible the individuals whose lives are at stake helps to personalize an issue and build understanding in keeping with the Biblical injunction, "Love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt."



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