

Looking God in the Face

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In Hebrew, פנים is the word for both face, and (vocalized differently) for interior. Faces are both our identifying feature and our way of expressing, consciously and unconsciously, our emotions and inner life. Our faces are both the fixtures of our identity, and the windows to the vagaries of our souls.

When Moshe first encounters God at the Burning Bush at Mount Sinai/Horev in Exodus Chapter 3, he turns his face away.

"And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." (Exodus 3:6)

"וַיִּסְתֵּר מִלְּפָנָיו, כִּי יֵרָא, מִתְהַבֵּיט אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים."

Moses and the Tablets of the Law by [Claude Vignon](#)

An uninitiated Moses is afraid to look upon God, even as manifested through a vision. He can hear the voice, but is afraid to face the divine. This turning away is not just an aversion of his face, but a refusal to accept the mission God gives him, as he makes excuse again and again as to why God should choose another. Moses is not ready to look God in the face.

Moses accepts the mission, albeit reluctantly, and returns to Sinai in triumph, bringing the People whom God sent him to rescue to the place where his mission began. He ascends the mountain, receives the Law, and our Parsha tells us that he is no longer averting his face before God:

"And the LORD spoke unto Moses **face to face**, as a person speaketh unto his friend." (Exodus 33:11)

"וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים, כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ"

Moses' reluctance is gone. He faces the Divine with confidence and assurance, and God speaks to him as if with an equal. God's face – both Divine identity and window to Divine emotion, is accessible to Moses. In turn, Moses is completely exposed to God's scrutiny.

Our Parsha, however, has more to say on the subject of Moses' and God's faces. As Moses uses his newfound confidence to confront God about the punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf, we have the following exchange:

Moses said to God: 'You told me to bring these people [to the Promised Land], but You did not tell me whom You would send with me. You also said that You know me by name and that You are [pleased with me](#). Now, if You are indeed pleased with me, allow me to know Your ways, so that I will know how to [remain] pleasing to You. [Also], You must [confirm](#) that this nation is Your people.

'My **Face** will go and lead you,' replied [God].

[Moses] said, 'If Your **face** does not accompany [us], do not make us leave this place. Unless You accompany us, how can it be known that I and Your people are pleasing to You? [But if You do,] I and your people will be distinguished from every nation on the **face** of the earth.'

God said to Moses, 'Since you have been pleasing to Me and I know you by name, I will also fulfill this request of yours.'

'Please let me [have a vision](#) of Your **Face**,' begged [Moses].

[God] replied, 'I will make all My good pass before you, and reveal the Divine Name in your presence. [\[But still,\] I will have mercy and show kindness to whomever I desire.](#)'

[God then] explained, 'You cannot have a vision of My **Face**. A man cannot have a vision of My **Face** [and still exist.](#)'

God then said, '[I have a special place where you can stand](#) on the rocky mountain. [When My glory passes by, I will place you in a crevice in the mountain, protecting you with My hand](#) until I pass by. I will then remove [My hand](#), and you will have a vision [of what follows from My existence](#). [My face itself](#), however, will not be seen. (Exodus 33:12-22)

Moses is demanding that God's presence – literally, God's face – accompany the People of Israel into the land. He speaks to God face to face, and he wants only that the people share in that experience. God agrees, but with a caveat. The Divine face will accompany them, but cannot be seen, even by Moses, as it

passes. The experience of the Divine is too powerful for human experience. It must be mediated through hindsight, literally a view of God's back, our view blocked by God's hand as Moses - and we along with him - cower in the cleft of a rock. God is willing to expose the people to the Divine presence, but not to the understanding of God's identity and innermost thoughts represented by the Divine face.

There is a coda in the Parsha to this story that takes this distance a step further. After his final ascent and descent from Sinai with the new tablets, Moses once again must cover his face:

Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two Tablets of the Testimony in his hand. As Moses descended from the mountain, he did not realize that the skin of his face [had become luminous](#) when [God] had spoken to him. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was shining with a brilliant light, they were afraid to come close to him. Moses summoned them, and when Aaron and all the community leaders returned to him, Moses spoke to them. After that, all the Israelites approached, and [\[Moses\] gave them instructions regarding all that God had told him on Mount Sinai](#). When Moses finished speaking with them, he placed a [veil](#) over his face. Whenever Moses came before God to speak with Him, he would remove the hood until he was ready to leave. He would then go out and speak to the Israelites, [telling them] what he had been commanded. The Israelites would see that the skin of Moses' face was glowing brilliantly. Moses would then replace the veil over his face until he would [once again] speak with God.

(Exodus 34:29-35)

Moses' exposure to the Divine face, causes his own face to take on some of the characteristics of the Divine. It literally glows, and is too much for the people to take. On one hand, the people get to experience a mediated version of the Divine face that they can look at only in small doses while they are elevated by Torah study. On the other hand, Moses must be veiled in normal interactions with the people. Moses goes from averting his face when encountering the Divine at

the burning bush, to veiling his face when interacting with humans. The elevation Moses goes through comes at a price – his intimacy with God is incompatible with intimacy with his fellow humans. Moses will spend the rest of his career struggling to relate to the people he helped to redeem from slavery, ending with his removal as their leader – unable to bring them to the Promised Land.

This tension between God's transcendence ("for a person shall not see me and live") and immanence (Moses ability to speak to God "face to face as a person speaks to a friend") is embedded in this story of faces. Moses shuttles between Earth and Heavens, humans and God, and as he approaches one, he must of necessity distance from the other. Even the greatest of prophets could not reconcile these two poles.

Yet, I think the message of the Parsha is that nevertheless, he tries. He continues to ascend the mountain, to experience and understand the Divine, but he always comes back, and communicates what he has learned to the people. He may need to be veiled, but he lives among his people. The experience of the Divine is not meaningful unless it can be translated into Torah – a teaching – that he can share. The impossibility of this translation makes it no less necessary.

For the past few years, I have spent a good part of my week on the mountain (Gilboa, not Sinai), studying God's Torah, and trying to see the Divine Face in the faces of my teachers. The Torah I learn sometimes seems distant from the daily ethical struggles I care about. Other times, however, the learning's relevance jumps out at me, and I feel a need to carry it down the mountain. Often, when trying to apply the principles to the world, what was clear in theory becomes murky in practice, as if seen through a veil.

Shabbat Shalom



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