

Parshat Ki Tissa:
On Seeing and Not Seeing God
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This week's *parsha*, *parshat Ki Tissa*, is largely about seeing--desires to see, failures to see, prohibitions on seeing, and glorious visions. It is about the deeply human thirst for absolute transparency and the divine insistence upon opacity. And it is about the search for the visible face of God refracted ultimately in the face of the human.

Though this *parsha* is rich, the central episode, that of the golden calf, begins with an act of seeing.

The people saw that Moshe delayed in coming down the mountain... (Exodus 32:1)

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לְרִדְתָּ
(שמות לב:א)

In fact, it was what they did *not* see that gets this narrative going. Eagerly anticipating Moshe's return from his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, the people miscalculate the prescribed date (according to Rashi), despair of their leader and of God, and demand a new one.

...[T]he people gathered against Aharon and said to him, Come, make us a god who will go before us, for that man Moshe, who brought us from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him (Exodus 32:1).

... וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּמ
עֲשֵׂה־לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לְפָנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה
מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֵלֵנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לֹא
יָדַעְנוּ מַה־הָיָה לוֹ: (שמות לב:א)

With no visible human leader to rely on, Moshe's message of the invisible God became similarly unreliable, and a new, tangible, observable replacement is sought. The result is the undeniably solid calf of gold.

This event is identified by Moshe as a "*chata'a gedola*," a "great sin" (Exodus 32:30). The people have failed miserably in their traitorous attempt to render God palpably, identifiably real. It is, therefore, quite shocking to find Moshe himself manifest an impulse not all that different from theirs. Soon after begging God for forgiveness on behalf of the people and after witnessing the plague God sent to purge them of their sin, Moshe makes two outrageous requests of God. First:

Let me know Your ways. (Exodus 33:13)

הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דְּרֹכֶיךָ (שמות לג:יג)

And then, even more radically,

Let me see Your glory. (Exodus 33:18)

הִרְאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ: (שמות לג:יח)

Moshe wants to see God! He wants an actual visual of the divine.

But God is not forthcoming, saying,

... You cannot see My face, for man may not see me and live. (Exodus 33:20) . . . לֹא תִכַּל לִרְאֹת אֶת־פָּנַי כִּי לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי (שמות לג:כ)

The message seems clear enough: No human being can actually lay eyes on God and survive. Full visual disclosure is simply not in the realm of sustainable possibilities, and so Moshe must settle for second best, a kind of partial disclosure:

Says God: "[Y]ou will see my back; but My face must not be seen" (Exodus 33:23). וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֵרַי וּפָנַי לֹא יִרְאוּ (שמות לג:כג)

God's refusal to share His face, His most clear essence, with Moshe is uniquely interesting, and uniquely perplexing, in light of its surrounding literary context. For this episode is immediately preceded by an unambiguous, and rather famous, characterization of the relationship between Moshe and God *through the face!* Exodus 33:11 states:

The Lord would speak to Moshe face to face, as one man speaks to another. וְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים כַּאֲשֶׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ

The face, alas, was the locus of their communication. The face was where God met Moshe and where Moshe met God. And yet it is the face that cannot ultimately be seen by Moshe. It is the face that he is denied. How might we understand this paradoxical relationship? How can the place of greatest access also be the place of no access?

In order to address this question, we must take a wider look at the theme of seeing God in the Torah. Though us moderns largely assume the impossibility of this task, we need not look too hard to find references to its possibility in the Torah. *Parshat Mishpatim* recounts the following mysterious event preceding the revelation at Sinai:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended. (10) **They saw the God of Israel:** under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. (Exodus 24:9-10) ט וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא וְשִׁבְעִים מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: י וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לַבֵּית הַסַּפִּיר וְכַעֲצֻם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר: (שמות כד:ט-י)

Presaging the vision of Yechezkel much later on, this elite group saw the God of Israel. *What* they saw is surely mystifying, but *that* they saw is unequivocally clear.

Yet the revelation of the Law does not take place in the company of this seeing group. Instead God tells Moshe to leave them behind and to ascend still further on his own to receive the Tablets. He does so, entering into the cloud of God. We are told of the vision of those left behind, in Exodus 24:17-18:

Now the Presence of the Lord **appeared in the sight** of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain. (18) Moshe went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain; and Moshe remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

יז ומראה כבוד יהוה כאש אכלת ברֶאשׁ
 ההר לעיני בני ישראל: יח ויבא משה
 בתוך הענן ויעל אל־ההר ויהי משה בְּהַר
 ארְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה:

The people down below, all of *B'nei Yisrael*, had an intense visual experience here. They saw, with their very own eyes, the *mar'eh*, the appearance, of a fiery God. But notice how different Moshe's experience was. He, now in full relation to God, saw neither fire nor sparkling sapphire. He entered a cloud. A place of blurriness, of ambiguity. That's where he found God most closely.

The same remarkable contrast can be detected in *parshat Yitro*, where we are first introduced to the awesome Sinai experience. In Exodus 20:15 and 18 we are told:

(15) **All the people saw** (*ro'im*) the thunder and lightening, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance.

טו וְכָל־הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת
 וְאֶת־הַלְפִידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר וְאֶת־הַהָר
 עֹשֵׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֵק:
 יח וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֵק וּמִשָּׁה נִגַּשׁ
 אֶל־הָעֲרַפֵּל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים:

(18) So the people remained at a distance, while Moshe approached the *arafel*, the thick fog, where God was

B'nei Yisrael were granted a sensual encounter with the divine. They might not have actually seen the God of Israel here, but they did see manifestations of God's power, images as well as sounds. God's presence could be discerned clearly, without ambiguity. But notice Moshe's profound experience, in contrast. To truly encounter God at Sinai, Moshe had to enter the *arafel*, the fog, the place without flashing lights and crashing sounds. The place of cloudiness, maybe even a little darkness. For in the absence of absolute seeing, space opened up for real vision. Moshe entered the fog because "שם האלוהים," *there* God could be found.

So let us return now to our point of departure, where we are told both that Moshe has the most intimate of relationships with God's face *and* that he may not see God's face. We now know that he, along with others, was able to see different appearances of God in the past, and perhaps this is the "*achor*," the back of God, that is offered to him directly. But the *panim*, the face: that is decidedly off limits. It could be intensely engaged, but it could never be unmasked. We are now able to understand why.

It turns out that intimacy is not actually born of seeing, of raw observation, of data collection regarding contours and features. Relationships of the deepest sort do not emerge from perceptions of absolute clarity, of unmistakable transparency. On the contrary, "לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחָי," "Man may not see Me and live," says God. It's not just that one could not sustain a physical life in the face of that kind of visual encounter. Rather, one's spiritual, soulful life would actually be flattened by such a misguided reduction, deadened by the crushing of mystery. For God is not an entity to be seen once and for all, but a relationship to be entered into for eternity. So,

yes, Moshe spoke to God *panim el panim*--face to face, essence to essence--but he truly communed with God in the *arafel*, in the in-between, in the domain of ambiguity, of fog, in the blurry space of not fully knowing and not fully seeing.

Our story ends with a different set of *panim*. After having shattered the first set of Tablets in the face of the Golden Calf, Moshe goes up to Mount Sinai again, where he carves, and God engraves, a second set. He returns a changed man.

So Moshe came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moshe came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moshe was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with [God]." (Exodus 34:29)

וַיְהִי בְרִדְתּוֹ מֹשֶׁה מֵהָר סיני וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת
 הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִן־הָהָר
 וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ
 אֹתוֹ: (שמות לד:כט)

In being denied God's face, Moshe's own face was transformed. He emerged beaming with light, perhaps carrying some of God's own energy with him as he faced the people. But he had just learned something about the nature of revealing and the profundity of concealing, and so his own face would also not be fully exposed. He covered himself intermittently with a veil.

(33) And when Moshe finished speaking with them [with *bnei Yisrael*], he put a veil over his face. (34) Whenever Moshe went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, (35) the Israelites would see the face of Moshe--that his skin was radiant. Moshe would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him. (Exodus 34: 33-35)

לֹג וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדַּבֵּר אִתָּם וַיִּתֵּן עַל־פָּנָיו
 מַסּוֹה: לֹד וּבָא מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָי יְהוָה לְדַבֵּר
 אֹתוֹ וַיִּסֵּר אֶת־הַמַּסּוֹה עַד־צֵאתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא
 וַדַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת אֲשֶׁר יְצִוָה: לֹה
 וַרְאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־פָּנָי מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרַן
 עוֹר פָּנָי מֹשֶׁה וַהֲשִׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּסּוֹה
 עַל־פָּנָיו עַד־בָּאוּ לְדַבֵּר אֹתוֹ: (שמות
 לד:לג-לח)

Through Moshe's own education in not-seeing, *bnei Yisrael*, lovers of images and idols at the start of our tale, learn a similar lesson. Even a human face ought not be fully transparent, for even, or especially, a human face can itself reveal the glory of God. "הֲרָאִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ," Moshe had asked God. "Let me see Your glory." "פני לא יראו" --"My face may not be seen"--responded God, but "וַרְאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־פָּנָי מֹשֶׁה," the face of Moshe may be seen. It is through occasional moments of human exposure, unveiled and radiant, that we just might get a glimpse of God.



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