

Seeking God's Face in the Cleft of the Rock

We find Moses this week at the top of Mount Sinai, conferencing privately with God. The Ten Commandments are in ruins, shattered by Moses when he beheld the Hebrews worshipping the Golden Calf. The fate of the Israelites hangs in the balance; Moses has convinced God not to destroy them outright, but God seems ready to leave them to their own devices after their most heinous betrayal.

There is no one closer to God than Moses. Indeed, we are told in this chapter, וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים, “The Eternal would speak with Moses face to face” (Exodus 33:11). So when Moses asks for God's help leading the Hebrews, we might be surprised at God's reply: פָּנַי יֵלְכוּ וְהִנַּחְתִּי לָךְ, “My face shall go, and I will depart from you” (Ex. 33:14).¹ Moses begs God to reconsider; and indeed, God heeds his plea. Emboldened, Moses presses further: וַיֹּאמֶר הָרְאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ, “He said, ‘O let me behold your presence’” (Ex. 33:20). But God demurs: “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Eternal, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show, but you cannot see my face, כִּי לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי, which is usually translated “for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:18-19). Instead, God will place Moses in the cleft of the rock, place a hand over Moses' eyes, and pass by so that Moses can see only God's back. God will come very close to Moses, but the divine face will be shielded.

This passage is famously puzzling. Within ten verses, we go from “The Eternal would speak with Moses face to face” to “you cannot see my face.” My teacher, Simeon Chavel, offers one solution: Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God initiates face-to-face contact with any number of prophets, including Moses; but never may a prophet dare to initiate such an encounter with God. The sense seems to be, in Chavel's rendering, “You cannot *simply* look upon my face, for man cannot *simply* look upon me and live.”² God's face *can* be seen – as we are told directly – but only if and when God chooses to be seen.

This applies, of course, directly to the story of Purim, which we celebrated earlier this evening. The Scroll of Esther never mentions God, yet God seems to lurk behind every irony and coincidence. How else to explain Ahashuerus choosing Esther as his queen or Mordechai chancing to overhear a plot against the king or the Jews' unrestrained assault against their would-be persecutors at the story's end? We can't say with certainty that God is meant to “show up” in this text – and yet, we can't rule it out either. The Megillah is the classic example of the concept of divine concealment,

¹ I owe my reading of this passage to my teacher, Simeon Chavel, who explains his reasoning in “The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination” (*Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 2012, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 1-55), p. 40-46.

² *Ibid.* 42.

referred to as *hester panim*, “hiding the face.” Our tradition grapples with the truth that—in the real world—we also can’t really see God, though we look for hidden meaning in life’s ironies and coincidences.

There is one other biblical book that doesn’t mention God, though once again, the divine presence seems to suffuse the text.³ The Song of Songs, the scroll read during the Passover festival, is a florid (and occasionally lurid) series of erotic poems that has often been understood as a love story between Israel and God. Finding God here requires creative imagination and willful discovery, but the payoff is immense. The intimacy and mutuality, the vulnerability and longing describe a relationship you can almost taste and touch, one you can convince yourself is real while reading the book and that fades into fond memory long after the text is put away. Accessing God here requires a double-act of searching—you have to read and understand the text, and then you have to find the divine within seemingly secular words.

And this, I think is one of the lessons of Purim and of the encounter of Moses and God on Sinai. Even Moses doesn’t have the privilege of demanding that God be made manifest before his very eyes. God stays at a remove, wanting to be felt but not managed or owned. The Eternal warns Moses that reality is much more like Esther than Exodus. That is, the God of the world we live in is not a person, has no face, and cannot be seen. The stories of our tradition urge us to *search* for God while also reminding us incessantly that “finding God” is unlike finding anything else. We find God in moments of discovery, interpretation, and surprise. We find God in places where God cannot be, teaching us that the world is what it is yet is also more than it seems.

The Psalmist cuts right to the chase: אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ, “Your face, Eternal One, I shall seek. Do not hide your face from me. ... קוּהָ אֶל־יְהוָה, Hope toward the Eternal! Be strong and of good courage, and hope toward the Eternal” (Psalm 27:8-9, 14). I don’t think our tradition wants us to harbor illusions that God will be manifest on earth and solve our problems. But the wisdom handed to us through the generations is that the force of love and victory and connection and deliverance has power in our lives. We see it best when walking with open eyes through life.

As Purim fades and Passover looms ahead, let us retain the elusive promise of the Megillah—that some hint of divinity peeks through the cracks. And in the words of Song of Songs—which we read on Passover itself—“O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is comely” (Song of Songs 2:14).

³ It is possible that the word שְׁלֵהֶבֶתָּהּ (a mighty flame) in Song of Songs 8:6 might better be rendered שְׁלֵהֶבֶת יְהוָה (the flame of Yah). This would, then, be the single reference to God in Song of Songs’ eight chapters.