

Spiritual Intimacy

Shortly after the momentous occasion of the Giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, the Israelites commit a preposterous sin. They create a golden calf, build an altar, and worship that calf with sacrifices, saying: “this is your god, Israel, who took you out of Egypt.” Moshe pleads with God to show mercy to His rebellious children, and then makes a request which seems out of place. “Show me”, He says, “Your ways, so I may know You”.

Moshe continues to explain why he thinks that he deserves that knowledge: “You have said that I have gained Your favor, and how shall I know that this is true, unless you let me know You and Your ways better?” These are words one might hear from a spouse or a loved one, demanding to have a proof for the love and the stability of the relationship, and suggesting that by getting to know each other better they will be able to foster the relationship. Indeed, the biblical dialog most resembling this one is between a wife and a husband, albeit one of treachery and deceit: “Then Delilah said to him: How can you say you love me, when you don't confide in me? ... you haven't told me what makes you so strong.” (Judges 16:15)

Moshe asks for intimate relationship with God, not only for himself but for the people whom he represents, and with whom he is united, despite their iniquities and complaints, by his responsibility and love for them. Moshe wants to know how one can constantly infuse his life with religious and spiritual excitement, and therefore uses the verb יָדַע – to know, which in the bible connotes deep intimacy. A marriage can become lifeless and boring when spouses go through the motions of their daily life, as two people who happen to share assets and lodging. Spiritual life goes through similar process when the observant person, who was at first excited to be introduced to rituals, finds himself going through the motions, following the routine, the book, with no excitement or anticipation. Moshe's request is an argument in the people's favor: they have sinned because they only know the rigid law, the service of God! Had they known God, with the love and passion of one spouse to another, it would not have happened.

God answers that mercy, kindness, and graciousness, infuse the relationship with a sense of commitment and gratitude. Observing the laws governing our behavior towards other people, when applied to all humanity, can always provide new insights and excitement, and save us from boring routines. True giving is more than charity and it is not only monetary. It is giving and sharing time, attention, advice, and compassion, and it is extended, as the verse says, to thousands. Every person we meet and interact with, can teach us something new about the world and about ourselves, and when the interaction is one of loving kindness, of seeing and connecting with the humanity in the other, it is an uplifting and inspirational one.

The greatest lesson of the exchange between Moshe and God derived from the setting. Moshe hides in the crevice of the rock and from God passing His glory before him. God tells Moshe: “you will not be able to see My face, for man cannot see Me while alive, you will only be able to see My back...”

In the quest for God, as well as in the quest for love, there should always be an unknown. Husband and wife should be able to constantly seek for and find new facets of their beloved with which they are not familiar. This elusive quest creates mystery and longing, and in turn breeds love and passion. Our quest for God, which is a search for self and meaning, should be similar. We should strive to constantly learn and grow, intellectually and emotionally, from Torah, science, and nature, but mostly, from discovering our identity and qualities. The scene described above, with Moshe hiding in the crevice of the rock, could be understood as a parable, in which we are both the prophet and the image of God. We sometimes hide in the crevice of the rock, feeling lost and cowering in the dark, and sometimes pursue a dream, a vision, which is tantalizingly close but always a step ahead, seen only from the back.

Then, towards the end of a wholesome, compassionate life, a life of emulating God’s attributes, showing responsibility and honesty, and treating others with love and compassion, we finally reach the elusive image, and when God turns to look at him, he knows: I have found God, I have found myself...

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