

Torah Talk – Saturday, April 11, 2020

*<sup>18</sup> He said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" <sup>19</sup> And He answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Lord, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. <sup>20</sup> But," He said, "you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live." <sup>21</sup> And the Lord said, "See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock <sup>22</sup> and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen."*  
Exodus 33: 18-23

"G-d's face cannot be seen by human eye, but His "back," the traces of G-d's presence in the world, can be glimpsed *after* He has passed by. One of the Hassidic masters of the nineteenth century, R. Mordecai Yosef Leidner, known as the Mei HaShiloach, reads the reference to G-d's "back" as a temporal reference to the *past*—to that which has passed and gone. Moses is given insight into past history, to processes already under way. But to see His face, or Presence, would mean to read G-d's meanings in the present moment: This is beyond human understanding."  
Moses: A Human Life By Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

"The Chasam Sofer gives this explanation: 'We often find ourselves puzzled, even troubled, upon witnessing events happening around us. We are plagued by recurring questions, wondering why Hashem could allow such an event to occur and how it can possibly help further His ultimate plan.' Some events that we may have viewed as tragic can later be perceived as harbingers for growth and salvation, and as having paved the way for individual or national redemption. In other words, 'You will see my back,' says Hashem. The misfortune, the suffering endured, can very occasionally be understood as {Hebrew phrase that seems to be in hindsight}, and even then in retrospect. But "My face may not be seen." When actually undergoing pain, hardship, and travail, one will not be able to comprehend the reasons for it nor predict the ultimate outcome."  
You Can Make the Difference By C. R. Wagschal

"Our Sages say that the verse, "You will see My back, but My face may not be seen," was taught to Moshe Rabbeinu in response to Moshe's question: "Why do the righteous suffer?" R' Soloveitchik explains that the answer to this question lies in the difference between hashpa'at panim and hashpa'at oref. A righteous person receives goodness in a precise, targeted manner—quality over quantity. The wicked, on the other hand, experience unrestrained, overflowing goodness—quantity over quality."  
Shlomo Katz, Torah.org

"What does it mean that a human being cannot see God's face—but can we see God's back? In the words of the hatam Sofer, we cannot see God directly. We can only see the difference God has made after the fact. We can recognize God's reality by seeing the difference God has made in people's lives."  
Etz Hayim

"We encounter the reality of God when we experience goodness in the world, from the gift of life itself to the discovery of the capacity to do good in our souls, and the love and generosity of people around us whom God has inspired to do good."  
Etz Hayim

"Rashi's source-midrash visualizes the divine hand as leaving an imprint of light on Moses' face. Moses had asked to see God's Glory. God's answer had been enigmatic: 'You cannot see My face, for no man

may see Me and live". Now He completes His answer by placing Moses in a cave from which he will indeed be denied his desire. His visual perspective will limit him to seeing "from behind": precisely not the divine face that he desires. As a human being, he can only see obliquely; his vision is deflected. Even the crack of light in the cave will be obscured by the divine hand in the moment of passage.

Paradoxically, this obscuring, protective divine hand will leave his face radiating a displaced light. It is as though *vision* is reduced to an after-trace, while *touch* leaves it indelible mark."

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"Yet at the end of the Bible, we are told that Moses saw God *panim el panim* — face to face. How can such an encounter be both possible and impossible? God says to Moses "You cannot see my face, for man may not see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20). Perhaps the message is that we grow gradually more intimate with God's face as we get older. When we glimpse as much as it is given to us as individuals to glimpse, we are through with our earthly mission. Moses died when he had at last seen God face to face. That is in some sense our task in life — to see God truly according to our capacity. When we have fulfilled that task, we are through."

Rabbi David Wolpe, HuffPost