

March 2, 2013 - 20 Adar 5773

HIR - The Bayit

Steven Exler

As we remembered Irene Horowitz this week, many people spoke of a characteristic that she retained throughout her 100 years - may we be so blessed: when you spoke to her, she focused on you with a laserlike focus, as though you were the only thing in the room - maybe in the world.

This trait is one which people often find in and use to describe great leaders - recent US Presidents, and others - that their focus, the face-to-face encounter that you have with them, is very powerful, totally gripping, and creates an amazing - even if temporary - connection.

It is so hard to cultivate that behavior ourselves. Instead of attentive, focused conversation, we do anything else. Like the well-documented cocktail party (or Kiddush) head-twitch, where we constantly scope out who else is in the room to talk to while keeping 2/3, or maybe 1/3, of our attention on the person we are talking to. Or the Charlie Brown Adult Voice phenomenon, where, while nodding and acting like we're paying attention, we are lost in our own thoughts, and all we hear coming from the other person is "wah-wah wah-wah-wah-wah" (that noise is made by a trombone, by the way!). This is all bracketing the fact that most face to face encounter has been replaced with thumb to thumb, or device to device encounter! Or perhaps we're busy texting or checking email while someone is speaking to us.

Least likely is that we actually clear our heads, face the other person, fix our gaze on them, and open our ears, and heart, and hear and listen.

But that is the relationship we should be striving for, and it is embodied in our parashah. I want to look at God's encounter with Moshe to begin to unpack two guiding principles we might use in *our* encounters with each other.

In the forty-seven verses from chapter 33, verse 10 until the end of the parasha the word panim, "face," occurs in various forms about twenty-two times, in other words, in almost half the verses. Its most potent appearance is in 33:11:

שמות לג (יא) וְדַבֵּר יְקִיָּקָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים כְּאִשֶּׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ...

And the LORD spoke with Moses face to face, as a person would speak to a friend, a neighbor.

The Divine communication with a mortal - although Moshe was a special mortal - was as comfortable as two friends chatting. Rambam uses this verse when he describes the unique level of Mosaic prophecy, unparalleled in Jewish history. We can only imagine what that experience might have been like.

Allow me to translate the verse slightly differently, though:

שמות לג (יא) וְדָבַר יְקֹוֹק אֶל מֹשֶׁה פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים כְּאִשֶּׁר יִדְבַּר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ...

*And the LORD spoke with Moses face to face, as a person **should** speak to a friend, a neighbor.*

This is the call to us. God spoke to Moshe face to face, turning, as it were, God's whole self towards Moshe in a posture of attentiveness.

This is what we are supposed to do. Read this way, the pasuk is saying that our conversation with each other should be like the way God spoke to Moses - face to face.

The Midrash Tanhuma (Ki Tissa 27) asks exactly how that meeting between mortal and Divine happened:

מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת כי תשא סימן כז

ודבר ה' אל משה פנים אל פנים אין אנו יודעין אם השפל הגביה עצמו אם הגבוה השפל אריב"ל כביכול גבהותו של עולם הרכין עצמו שנאמר וירד ה' באהל,

We don't know whether the lowly one (Moshe) raised himself up, or the Most High One brought itself low! R' Yehoshua ben Levi said, if such a thing were possible, the Height of the World bent itself down, as is said, "and God descended upon the Tent."

So we learn that in speaking to someone we sometimes have to move ourselves to the place where they are. I believe this is certainly so even more in listening. We turn ourselves to the speaker, and we travel emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, to meet them. That does not mean a negation of the self, but moving a part of ourselves to a place of being truly able to connect to the other.

This is the **first teaching** of God's speech to Moshe as פנים אל פנים (*panim el panim*) - that it involves a presence with the other, and a movement toward the other. Much of this links up with Emmanuel

Levinas' philosophy of the face of the other which makes a claim upon us, and is in a way the basis of human responsibility.

But if we read on a few verses, we are stopped in our tracks. The Torah seems to directly contradict itself fewer than 10 verses later, in verse 20 and then again in verse 23:

שמות לג (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאוֹת אֶת פָּנַי כִּי לֹא יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחָי:...

(כג) וַהֲסַרְתִּי אֶת כַּפֵּי וַרְאִיתָ אֶת אַחֲרַי וּפְנֵי לֹא יִרְאוּ:

(20) And God said, you cannot see my face (*panai*), for a human cannot see me and live.

(23) When I remove my hand, you will see my back, but you cannot see my face (*panai*).

So if a human cannot see God's face and live, how did God speak to Moshe face to face? It is the same Hebrew word - *panim* - in both cases. Did Moshe see God's face, whatever that means, or not?

The commentaries and midrashim offer many resolutions to this difficulty: some say that the *panim* Moshe could see was God's goodness in the world, but what he could not see was the nature of Divine Judgment and Justice. Some say that it was simply a question of time - sometimes Moshe could see God's face, and sometimes not. And there are others.

What seems clear is that within the word *panim*, within the face to face encounter, there was something Moshe could access (a time of *panim el panim*), and something he could not (*lo tukhal lirot et panay*). So it is with us. Even when we face each other, and present ourselves to each other, there is still so much hidden.

When we begin to speak, even if I've done my best to meet you where you are, there is just so much about you, your emotions, your responses to my words, that I cannot and do not know. What this calls for, I believe, is what Professor Moshe Halbertal describes as a hermeneutic of charity, or trust, a version of Pirkei Avot's call to be *דן את כל האדם לכף זכות* (*dan et kol ha-adam le-khaf zekhut*), to judge every person favorably. When we speak, and when we listen, we want to do it knowing that even when we are face to face, there still so much I do not see and know, so I have to be especially charitable and kind.

This is the **second teaching** of God's speech to Moshe as פנים אל פנים (*panim el panim*) - that despite all my efforts to know you and move towards you when I approach you to speak or to listen, I must remember also to factor in the unknown - what you may be struggling with in this moment completely independent of our encounter, how you perceive our relationship, and so many other things - and so I must be gentle, and charitable.

So -- in a world filled with quick and easy alternatives to the face to face encounter, and temptations that draw us away from it even when it is happening, if we want to emulate God's approach to the highest form of encounter we have to strive to return to that model.

In any - and every - conversation, small to large, let us try to aim to really be face to face, self to self, reaching for where the other person is, blocking out other distractions, and simultaneously giving the benefit of the doubt, knowing there is so much we don't know about the other. It's a high bar - it is God's bar - but it is so worth reaching for.

Let me close with the words of the Ohr Hahayyim on our verse, who reminds us that the key to this way of communicating is preparation. Before we begin our conversations, major or small, I just take a breath, and prepare myself, for as he writes:

אור החיים שמות לג:יא

(יא) ודבר ה' וגו' פנים אל פנים. הכוונה בזה הוא כפי שיעור ההכנה שהיה עושה משה להקבלת פני שכינה - לאותו שיעור תהיה ההשגה מפנים העליונים. כי כפי אשר יכין אדם עצמו להשפעת הקדושה - ישיג.

The meaning is as follows: in accordance with the degree to which Moses prepared himself to greet the Divine Presence, in like measure he would attain comprehension of the Supreme presence; for to the degree to which a person prepares himself to receive the flow of kedushah, so will one attain it.

May our encounters with family, friends, co-workers, all people - each other - be with preparedness and preparation, with movement toward the other and awareness of all that we cannot know, and may they be *panim el panim*, and may they be vehicles to *kedushah*.

Shabbat shalom.