

In the Cleft of the Rock

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

Exodus 33:19-23

(19) And [God] answered, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name יהוה, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show,” (20) continuing, “But you cannot see My face, for a human being may not see Me and live.” (21) And יהוה said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock (22) 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. (23) Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

שמות ל"ג:י"ט-כ"ג
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
כָּל־טוֹבוֹי עַל־פְּנֶיךָ וְקָרָאתִי
בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה לְפָנֶיךָ וְחַנּוּתִי
אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֲחִין וְרַחֲמֹתַי
אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֲבַרְחָם: (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר
לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי כִי
לֹא־יִרְאֶנִּי הָאָדָם וְחַי: (כא)
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הִנֵּה מְקוֹם אֶתִּי
וְנִצַּבְתָּ עַל־הַצּוּר: (כב) וְהִיָּה
בְּעֵבֶר כְּבִלִי וְשִׁמְתִּיךָ בְּנוֹקְרַת
הַצּוּר וְשִׁכַּתִּי כְּפִי עָלֶיךָ
עַד־עֲבָרִי: (כג) וְהִסַּרְתִּי
אֶת־כְּפִי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֵרַי וּפְנֵי
לֹא יִרְאוּ: {פ}

Avivah Zornberg (The Particulars of Rapture p. 436) (21st century)

This is the point where the narrative digresses, apparently, from the agenda of national forgiveness and renewal to the private, mystical concerns of Moses. God's face, and His back, become

literalized in a way that even the Revelation at Mount Sinai has not approached: God's hand will cover Moses' face and will uncover it; he will see one part of God but not the other.

Rosh Hashanah 17b:5-8 (200 C.E.)

§ The verse states: **“And YHWH passed by before him, and proclaimed”** (Exodus 34:6). **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this. The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed Be, wrapped Godself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the order of the prayer. God said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them.**

ראש השנה י"ז ב:ה'-ח'
ויעבור יי על פניו ויקרא א"ר
יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי
אפשר לאומרו מלמד
שנתעטף הקב"ה כשליח
צבור והראה לו למשה סדר
תפלה אמר לו כל זמן
שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני
כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם

Hatam Sofer on Exodus 33:23 (1762-1839)

One is only able to recognize God's ways and his behavior after the fact. Only after time has passed and it is possible to link together all the facts, can one understand a little of the way God acts. At the time itself we cannot understand His deeds and we stand amazed. Thus, “you will see my back” – after some time

has passed you will understand My actions, “but my face will not be seen” – at the time of the events themselves, you will not see Me.

Chizkuni, Exodus 33:23:1 (13th century French Rabbi)

וראית את אחורי, “you will see My back;” you will see an aura of light which will linger after My essence has passed. The light which precedes Me and which is too dazzling, you will not see.

Berakhot 7a:33 (300 C.E.)

What did Moses see? It is said: “**And I will remove My hand, and you will see My back,** but My face you will not see” (Exodus 33:23). **Rav Ḥana bar Bizna said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Ḥasida,** the expression: “And you will see My back,” should be understood as follows: **This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He,** Who, as mentioned above, wears phylacteries, **showed him the knot of the phylacteries** of His head, which is worn on the back of the head.

ברכות ז' א:ל"ג

והסרתי את כפי וראית את
אחרי אמר רב חנא בר ביזנא
אמר רבי שמעון חסידא
מלמד שהראה הקדוש ברוך
הוא למשה קשר של תפילין:

Rabbi Chanan Morrison (adapted from Sapphire From the Land of Israel) Based on the above midrash. (21st Century)

There are two levels of knowledge. The first is an accurate knowledge of an object's true nature. The second is a limited knowledge, restricted by our intellectual or physical limitations. Regarding tangible objects, there may not be a significant difference between the two levels of knowledge. But when dealing with abstract concepts, especially with regard to the nature of God, the difference will be great — perhaps infinitely so.

The imagery of God's 'face' and 'back' corresponds to these two levels of knowledge. 'Face' in Hebrew is *panim*, similar to the word *p'nim*, meaning inner essence. True knowledge of God's infinite reality is God's 'face.'

Knowledge of God's reality according to our limited understanding, on the other hand, is referred to as God's 'back.' Moses was granted this partial, indirect knowledge — a grasp of the Divine that we are able to appreciate and apply in our finite world.

(Teaching of Rav Kook)

Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt (The Velveteen Rabbi) (21st century)

Jewish tradition interprets these verses the way we interpret all anthropomorphic descriptions of God in Torah -- as metaphor. God doesn't really have a face, nor a hand with which to shelter Moshe in the cleft of the rock, nor a back which Moshe might glimpse as God departs. These are human conceptions. We can't wrap our minds around the reality of what God is, so we mentally create God in an image we can understand.

I can relate to Moshe's request. It makes sense to me that he yearned for this kind of encounter. He wanted to encounter God *panim el panim*, face to face, presence to presence. He wanted a radical I/Thou connection with God -- and who could blame him? Instead, what he gets is a partial glimpse of a totality too great for him to comprehend.

Moshe can't grasp the wholeness of God from within the limited perspective of a single human mind. If he were to encounter all of what God is, his individual selfhood would disappear; the orderly limits of his mind would shatter. God gives Moshe only what he can handle. He can see God's goodness. He can listen to the recitation of one of God's names, which contains compassion and mercy along with remembrance of our misdeeds. And he can glimpse something of the divine Presence as it passes him by.

I don't think this passage is only about Moshe. I think it speaks to us, too. Where can we see God's goodness manifest? What are the names of God which we receive on the frequencies to which we are attuned? What afterimage of God's presence, as it were, are we able to perceive in the world around us?

Rabbi Ira Eisenstein (part of the founding generation of Reconstructionism) (21st century)

We cannot actually picture goodness. It is not a being; it is a force, like electricity.

Nobody ever actually saw electricity, but we can see and feel what electricity does. If

we have an electric heater and connect it, we get heat. We get to know what electricity is by what it does. In the same way, we get to know what God is by what God makes us do: when people are, so to speak, connected with God, they do good things. We call those people godly people, and their acts, godly acts. Whenever this force is active, we say that God has exercised influence and power.

Exodus 34:8-9

(8) Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, (9) and said, "If I have gained Your favor, O my lord, pray, let my lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!"

שמות ל"ד:ח-ט'
(ח) וַיִּמְהַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְדֹּף אֶרְצָה
וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-מֹנָי
מִצָּאתַי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲדֹנָי יְלֹרְנָא
אֲדֹנָי בְּקִרְבָּנוּ כִּי
עַם־קָשֶׁה־עֲרָף הוּא וְסָלַחְתָּ
לְעֹגְנוֹ וּלְחַטָּאתֵנוּ וּנְחַלְתָּנוּ:

Avivah Zornberg (p. 437) (21st century)

The question of structure emerges with compelling force: how does Moses' desire for personal mystical revelation mesh with the narrative of sin and forgiveness? It is remarkable that while he speaks in the first person singular when he asks for the vision of God's glory, he modulates to the first person plural in v 9: "If I have gained your favor... let God go in our midst... pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!" At the culmination of Moses' work of prayer, he identifies with the sin of the people; quietly, undramatically, the pronouns change. The fire in his bones is, by this point, so thoroughly integrated that it sparks out unselfconsciously in his syntax... he speaks with a quiet normalcy that seems to emerge seamlessly from the vision he has just experienced.

His reference to "*our* sin" is set in high relief against his earlier pronouns. Reproaching the people, he used the rhetoric of "You... I" "*You* have sinned- *I* shall go up...*I* shall atone for your sin." Pleading with God, he spoke of "*this* people... *their* sin... Erase *me*... (32:30-33). It is only in the prayer that leads to the vision of the cave and to God's final forgiveness that Moses begins to modulate from I to we: "For how shall it be known that Your

people have gained Your favor unless you go with *us*, so that *we* may be distinguished, *Your people and I*, from every people on the face of the earth?" (33:16).

God's reply still focuses on Moses' personal grace as the reason for His favor. Only after the revelation of the cave does Moses make the last movement to full solidarity with the people: "Pardon our iniquity and our sin..."

Yehuda Amichai,
from *Open Closed Open*
(1924-2000)

Birds' footprints in the sand on
the beach

Are like the handwriting of
someone

Who made lists to remember
things, names, numbers, and
places.

Birds' footprints in the sand at
night

Still remain by day, but I don't
see

the bird that imprinted them.

It's like that with God.

יהודה עמיחי

מהאֹסֶף פֶּתוּחַ סְגוּר פֶּתוּחַ:

עֲקֵבוֹת רְגְלֵי צִיפּוּרִים בַּחֹל

אֲשֶׁר עַל שֵׁפֶת הַיָּם,

כְּמוֹ כְּתָב-יָד שֶׁמָּשָׂהוּ רֶשֶׁם,

לְזִכּוֹר דְּבָרִים, שְׁמוֹת,

מְסַפְּרִים וּמְקוֹמוֹת. עֲקֵבוֹת

צִיפּוּרִים בַּחֹל בַּלַּיְלָה

נִשְׂאָרוֹת גַּם בַּיּוֹם, אֲבֵל לֹא

רְאִיתִי

אֶת הַצִּיפּוּר שֶׁהִטְבִּיעָה אוֹתָן.

כֵּךְ הָאֱלֹהִים.