

*Then Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended, and they saw the God of Israel. Under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. ---*  
Exod. 24:9-11

The Blessed Holy One sometimes is seen and sometimes is not seen, sometimes hears and sometimes does not want to hear; sometimes answers and sometimes does not answer; sometimes is found and sometimes is not found; sometimes is near and sometimes is not near. How so? He was seen by Israel at Sinai, as it says, *they saw the God of Israel...* Then He was concealed from them, as it says, *Since you saw no shape when the Lord your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire* (Deut. 4:15), and it says, *The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sounds of words but perceived no shape, nothing but a voice* (Deut. 4:12). ---

**Midrash Tanchuma, Haazinu 4**

In the report of this covenant, written with reluctance and reserve, the meaning of things that cannot properly speaking be reported is more deeply concealed, but finds direct expression when the God whom the representatives of the people “see” is called “the God of Israel”. --- Martin Buber

As representatives of the people, Moses, Aaron, Aaron’s sons and seventy elders ascend Mount Sinai, and, most remarkably, “see” God in some sort of vision – without, as one might expect, their being destroyed. They also eat and drink, as was customary in the sealing of the agreement (and often done in business to this day). --- Everett Fox

In the world to come, there is nothing corporeal, and no material substance; there are only souls of the righteous without bodies, like the ministering angels. And since in that world there are no bodies, there is neither eating there, nor drinking, nor anything that human beings need on earth. None of the conditions occur there which are incident to physical bodies in this world, such as sitting, standing, sleep, death, grief, merriment, etc. So the ancient sages said: “A pearl in the mouth of Rav was: [The future world is not like this world.] In the future world there is no

eating nor drinking nor propagation nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the radiance of the Divine Presence, as it says: *they beheld God, and they ate and drank.*” (Talmud, **Berakhot** 17a) This passage clearly indicates that as there is no eating or drinking there, there is no physical body hereafter. The phrase “the righteous sit” is allegorical and means that the souls of the righteous exist there without labor or fatigue. The phrase “their crowns on their heads” refers to the knowledge they have acquired, and for the sake of which they have attained life in the world to come. This is their crown...Ad what is the meaning of the Sages’ statement “feasting on the radiance of the Divine Presence”? It means that the righteous attain to a knowledge and realization of the truth concerning God to which they had not attained while they were in the murky and lowly body. --- Maimonides, **Mishneh Torah**, Laws of Repentance 8:2.

It was taught: Rabbi Meir used to say, Why is blue specified from all of the other colors [for **tzitzit**]? Because blue resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of the Throne of Glory, as it is said, *under God's feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.* And it is written, *Like the appearance of sapphire stone is the likeness of the throne.* (Ezek. 1:26) --- Talmud, **Menachot** 43b

*They saw the God of Israel:* They did not see Him literally, but in a prophetic vision. The same is true of Isaiah’s vision: *I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne* (Isa. 6:1), even though it says *My own eyes have beheld the King Lord of Hosts* (Isa. 6:5). This is made clear in Ezekiel’s vision, when he says, *They were the same creatures that I had seen below the God of Israel at the Chebar Canal* (Ezek. 10:20), saying that he had “seen” what he originally called merely *visions of God* (Ezek. 1:1). --- Abraham ibn Ezra

*Like the very sky for purity.* Rather, as Onkelos translates, “Like a vision of the sky for brightness.” Once they were redeemed, there was light and joy before him. --- Rashi

The language is circumspect. There is no description of God Himself, only of the celestial setting beneath the visionary heavenly throne. Even so, the Hebrew particle k- is used in order to indicate mere similarity and approximation. --- Dr. Nahum Sarna, JPS Commentary

The vision recorded in these verses departs in many ways from other biblical apprehensions of the Divine: God is not hidden; there is neither cloud nor smoke; Moses is in no wise distinguished from those who accompany him; and, further, the setting appears bereft of the covenantal framework. --- Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, The Torah: A Modern Commentary

Vision looks inward and becomes duty. Vision looks outward and becomes aspiration. Vision looks upward and becomes faith. --- Rabbi Stephen S. Wise

There is no hint here of the harm that might befall one who beholds God. Nor is the sight of God restricted to Moses alone. Indeed, God is depicted as having feet and even joining in a festive meal to celebrate the sealing of the covenant.

My point is that seeing God is not quite the aberration Graetz (Heinrich Graetz, rationalist 19<sup>th</sup> c. historian) would have us believe. The Bible is not a book but a library. It abounds with a spectrum of complementary, contrasting and conflicting views as preserved by different sources and traditions. Diversity is not anathema. The Talmud records that books like Ezekiel, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Esther made it into the canon of Hebrew Scripture after much dispute, because they often contain often large chunks of theologically objectionable material. The editors did not put a premium on consistency and uniformity, but rather on a multiplicity of clashing voices driven by a hunger for the holy. A tolerance for diverse opinion and practice is imbedded in the foundation text of Judaism and in the vast exegetical literature which it inspired. --- Rabbi Ismar Schorsch

I find it symbolic that in this most pragmatic of portions, dealing with social interactions in this physical world, the Torah brings a mystical vision. It is almost like it is saying, this is not all there is. The great German sociologist Max Weber

spoke about the disenchantment of the world in contemporary times. Everything can be understood by science, everything can be manipulated by technology. There is material stuff and nothing more. There is no mystery, no reality beyond what we can calculate. The universe is simply matter in motion. Small wonder that the universe seems to be without purpose.

Mystics believe in an underlying reality beyond the material world. They believe that there moments that human beings can tune in to that underlying reality, like our car radio tunes into waves in the air. The seventy elders in our Torah reading were able to tune into that underlying reality, seeing a sea of blue beneath their feet as they ate and drank. Our rabbis tried to enter paradise and discover that hidden reality. Only Rabbi Akiba succeeded. He said that if you touch that reality, do not say that it is mere water, mere fluid, ordinary matter. If you touch that reality say that there is something more out there, a spiritual dimension to existence.

Reaching that spiritual reality has been the quest of mystics in every generation. Perhaps in this age of disenchantment, we need such a mystical quest more than ever. --- Rabbi Michael Gold

The Torah cannot tell us exactly what Moses and his company "saw." It falls back, as it must, on metaphor. It was like this, and like that: white, luminous, pure. The experience of God defies language, transcends speech, confounds ordinary knowledge.

You cannot "know" God in this way, the Torah says at many points, but you *can* know what God wants of you. Follow the **mishpatim** (laws) and other **mitzvot**, lead a life marked by justice and compassion, work to construct a society marked by these virtues, and you will, at the very least, know you are spending your days wisely, doing God's will. You may even encounter God at various points along this Way of Torah, as Moses and the elders encountered God at the outset of the Way.  
--- Dr. Arnold Eisen

This is truly an extraordinary passage; particularly because we know from slightly later in the Torah that Moses is told that no one can see God and live (Exod. 33:20). In fact, in **Parashat Mishpatim**, immediately after the vision of God and the pavement of sapphire, the text says, *Yet He did not raise His hand against the*

*leaders of the Israelites . . .* (Exod. 24:11), telling us, in other words, how remarkable an event this was: they saw God, but God allowed them to live nonetheless.

So, in the end, **Parashat Mishpatim** is not so simple: it is not only the return to the common experience of day-to-day life after the Revelation at Sinai. It describes a mixture of both the routine and the profound after all—the human dilemmas of everyday life and the divine sapphire pavement. Rudolph Otto, the great scholar of religion in the early part of the 20th century, wrote about the "numinous," the nonrational, mysterious dimension of existence that, on rare occasions, we are able to glimpse. Moses, Aaron, and the elders were granted that insight. But perhaps what we come to see here, in the juxtaposition of that story on the mountain and the many more ordinary cases brought earlier in the parashah, is the possibility that these two domains of existence are ever intertwined—and that both are holy. ---  
Dr. Barry Holtz

Scholars understand this **sappir**, sapphire, as a deep blue common to royalty. However, the mystics tend to read it as "transparency of crystal." Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, in his book Jewish Meditation, says this is related to the practice of meditation in which one images pure transparence without any color. "One images first the transparency of crystal and then the transparency of pure colorless empty space." Perhaps this could bring an intense experience of the nearness of God, Who fills all the earth with His glory, even the air around us. After all, when one sees "nothing," What Else is left...

Rashi explains that the "sapphire pavement" was a building brick that God had, so-to-speak, placed at His feet during the Israelites' long exile to "remind" Himself of their suffering.

Notably, when Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, and the seventy elders ascended Mt. Sinai and saw God's throne in a vision, they saw a solitary brick at His feet. They did not see majestic palaces and the other trappings of royalty. We must remind ourselves constantly that our skyscrapers, our most brilliant technology, and our most advanced weapons make no impression at all in the spiritual world. None of our material gains has a lasting impact. In this respect, those whose focus is on material gains are like the fox that starved itself for three days in order to squeeze

through a hole in the orchard fence, who, after eating its fill, had to starve itself for another three days in order to squeeze its way out of the orchard. What matters in the spiritual world is not something's appearance, but its intrinsic significance. --- **Ha'mussar V'ha-da'at**, R' Avraham Yoffen (1887-1970; head of the Novardok Yeshiva in Bialystok, Poland; New York and Jerusalem)