

See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock 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. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back, but My face must not be seen. --- Exod. 33:21-23

On the mountain where I always speak to you, Moses, there is a place ready for Me for your need, where I will hide you so that you shall not be harmed (through experiencing My Presence). --- Rashi

There is a place near Me refers to the location of the **Shekhinah**, the Divine Presence. It says, "the place is with Me," but it does not say, "I am in the place." For the world is not God's location, but the Holy One, Praised be He, is the location of the world. --- **Midrash Genesis Rabbah** 68:9

There is a place near Me — as the text continues, it speaks of "My Presence", the nearness of heaven. "Station yourself on the rock" — live at such a level that you will be like a rock, for that which is for God's sake. "And as My Presence passes by" — But when a moment for God's Presence will pass by, and it involves your own honor, "I will place you in the cleft of the rock" — put yourself in the cleft, and make yourself humble. --- Based on teaching of Rabbi Meir Shapira of Lublin, d. 1934

God, You are my God; I search for You, my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You, as a parched and thirsty land that has no water. I shall behold You in the sanctuary and see Your might and glory. --- Psalm 63:2-3

It was taught: Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha said, "I once entered the innermost part [of the Temple] to offer incense, and I saw **Akatriel-Yah** the Lord of hosts, sitting on a high and exalted throne. He said to me: 'Ishmael, My son, bless Me!' I responded: 'May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger and Your mercy prevail over your other attributes, so You deal with Your children compassionately and be more gracious to them than the law demands.' He nodded His head to me." We learn from this that the blessing of an ordinary individual should not be taken lightly. --- Talmud, **Berakhot** 7a

God's revelation to Moshe is elaborately choreographed. God instructs Moshe to stand near Him so that He may shield Moshe with His hand as He passes before him. God then takes His hand away, so that Moshe catches sight of God from behind. According to the Talmud (**Berakhot** 7a), God grants Moshe a glimpse of the knot of God's tefillin, worn at the base of the back of the neck. The tefillin are small boxes containing pieces of parchment inscribed with Biblical verses. Earlier in this passage, the rabbis ask what is written on God's tefillin, and respond that they bear a verse from Chronicles (17:21): *Who is like Your people, Israel, one nation in the land?* That is, God's tefillin attest to the unique connection between God and Israel. And so when Moshe catches a glimpse of God's tefillin knot—the Hebrew word for knot, **keshet**, means bond—he is also being assured of God's irrevocable bond with the Jewish people.

This revelation takes place in the cranny of a rock – in a hidden place where no one is around to bear witness. It is a private revelation for Moshe alone, in striking contrast to the public display at Sinai. The Torah relates that on Mount Sinai, God appeared in a cloud of fire with thunder and lightning, accompanied by shofar blasts as the mountain trembled violently. According to the Talmud (**Shabbat** 88b), the people were terrified by the divine voice – with each commandment spoken by God, their souls fled and they recoiled twelve miles to the rear, such that the angels had to help them back to their places. The revelation at Sinai was loud and fiery, in stark contrast to the more quiet and subdued revelation to Moshe in the cranny of the rock.

The contrast between these two revelations reminds me of another revelation that took place in the life of my own family a couple of months ago, at my daughters' school **Chumash** ceremony during the fall of second grade. Ordinarily this ceremony is held in the spacious high-ceilinged sanctuary of a local synagogue, because the school auditorium is not large enough to contain all the parents, grandparents, and siblings who come to celebrate the occasion. But my daughters' **Chumash** ceremony was very different – it took place in the midst of the Corona pandemic, during a partial lockdown when the schools were open but parents were not allowed to set foot on the premises. Their ceremony was held in the school gym, a cavernous room with only the tiniest windows to let light in through the crannies. Each second grade class was called to the gym at a different time to receive their **Chumash** from their teacher. The kids sat in the otherwise empty bleachers and chanted a few verses from the opening of the Torah, and then filed back to their classroom to lower their masks and eat their lunches at their desks. I know this because my girls told me about it afterwards; I wasn't there. When I

expressed my disappointment that the school had not even sent a Zoom link, my daughter insisted that “It wasn’t such a big deal, **Ima**.” But I begged to differ. It was true that my girls had not experienced all the festivities and fanfare generally associated with this occasion. The revelation they experienced was more akin to Moshe’s private revelation in the cranny of the rock, but it was a revelation nonetheless. Like all the second-grade classes before them, they had also received their own **Chumashim**, and they would also begin learning the first chapter of Genesis that week. The rabbis teach in **Pirkei Avot** (3:6) that God is present wherever people sit and study Torah. Even if only one person is engaged in the solitary study of Torah, the divine presence rests upon that individual. As I told my girls, every time they opened their **Chumash** to learn from it, the divine presence would be right there with them.

Later the school sent pictures of each child receiving his or her **Chumash**, though I couldn’t fully make out my girls’ faces – they were obscured by Corona masks. Our **parsha** teaches that when Moshe came down the mountain, his face was so radiant that the Israelites shrank back in fear, so Moshe had to cover his face with a veil. A veil is not quite a Corona mask, but then again, no two experiences of revelation are the same. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of God from the grand stage of a communal experience; other times we experience God from a hidden cranny where we learn all alone. May the Torah we study remind us of our unique connection to God and of the many possible ways to experience revelation. ---
Ilana Kurshan, 2021

For forty years Shimon the Just served Israel as **Kohen Gadol**. The last year, he said to them: “This year I will die.” They said to him: “No! How do you know?” He told them, “Every year, when I have entered into the Holy of Holies, there was an old man dressed and wrapped in white who entered and exited with me. But this year, he entered with me, but did not exit with me.” ...Rabbi Abbahu told them: “He said it was a man, but I say it was the Holy One, Praised be He.” --- Jerusalem Talmud, **Yoma** 27a

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak asked Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman: “Since I have heard you are a master of **aggadah**, from where was the (original) light created?” He replied: “(The verse) teaches us that the Holy One, praised be He, wrapped himself in it as in a robe and irradiated with the luster of His majesty the whole world from one end to the other.” Now he had answered him in a whisper; Rabbi Shimon said to him: “There is an explicit verse (to that effect), *Who is wrapped in*

a robe of light (Ps. 104:2), yet you say it in a whisper!” He answered him: “Just as I heard it in a whisper, so I told it to you in a whisper.” Rabbi Berekhiah said, “If Rabbi Yitzchak had not expounded (it) in public, it would be impossible to say it.”

Before this, what did (the Sages) say (on this matter)? Rabbi Berekhiah said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak: “The light was created from the place of the Temple, as it is written: *And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the east, (with roar like the roar of mighty waters, and the earth was lit up by His glory)*. (Ezek. 43:2) And His glory always refers to the Temple, as it is said, *O Throne of Glory exalted from of old, our Sacred Shrine.*” (Jer. 17:12) --- **Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 3:4**

When the first Temple was built, another Temple was erected throughout all worlds, illumining all worlds. The world became fragrantly firm, and all supernal windows opened, radiating. There has never been such joy in all the worlds as on that day. Then those above and those below opened, uttering song, namely Song of Songs--song of those musicians who play for the blessed Holy One. --- **Zohar**, II, 143a