

Hidden Faces

Yom Kippur Morning Service 2020

by Rabbi Sarah Weissman

“Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” So Jacob says to his brother Esau as they meet after more than 20 years of estrangement. It’s been twenty years since Jacob stole the birthright and the blessing, twenty years since Esau swore to kill Jacob in revenge, twenty years since Jacob fled to his mother’s family in Aram. Will their meeting now be one of conflict or reconciliation? The moment of truth arrives. We read, “Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept” (33:4). Jacob is bowled over; he cannot believe that Esau is so ready to forgive him. So he urges Esau to accept his gifts, reparations for the blessings he stole. And he says, “Please, take this gift, for seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.”

“Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” What a strange pronouncement to make. First of all, the Torah makes it clear that no human being can see God’s face and live. And second of all, how does God have a face to begin with? Now it’s possible that Jacob, like many ancient people, believed that God did in fact have a body and a face. And we know that just the night before, Jacob had come face-to-face with a divine being, an angel, with whom he wrestled until dawn. So Jacob knows from divine faces. But we know that that’s not all Jacob means when he compares seeing Esau’s face to seeing God’s face. He means that after so much pain and anger and alienation, Jacob didn’t believe he would ever see his brother’s face again, and so seeing him is a kind of miracle. It means that in this moment, Jacob looks at Esau and sees a Divine spark, the *tzelem Elohim*, the image of God, in which his brother is made. It means that this encounter, fraught with danger and fear, and ending with forgiveness and love, is holy. Jacob is also pointing to an even deeper truth: that looking, really looking, at another human being’s face brings us into contact with the Divine. Like an encounter with God, it can be dangerous and awesome, terrifying and exhilarating. And like an encounter with God, if we are paying attention, looking at the face of another person transforms us.

The human face is, quite literally, wonder-full. Unless you are an identical twin, your face is the only one like it, a representation of the uniqueness of you as a person. Faces are proof of God’s greatness, as the Talmud declares: “When a person stamps several coins with one seal, they are all similar to each other. But the Holy One of Blessing stamps all people with the seal of Adam the first man, and not one of them is similar to another” (San. 38a). In other words, only God can use a single mold for all human beings and have each one come out looking different. Faces are powerful: they can launch a thousand ships and convey deep emotions without a single word. Faces show that we’re alive: it is a common and ancient practice to cover the face of a person when they die. Faces are beautiful: within hours of birth, babies’ eyes are naturally drawn to the human face.¹

¹ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/03/200302200736.htm>

In Marilyn Robinson's wonderful novel *Gilead*, the aging Reverend John Ames says, "I realize there is nothing more astonishing than a human face.... You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any."² Here Reverend Ames is echoing the great Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas saw the face of the Other as the source of all meaning. It is the beginning of relationship, the essence of which is obligation. As Levinas puts it, "The Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me."³ The face of the Other confronts us in our egotism and is equivalent to a "calling into question... my joyous possession of the world."⁴ The face of the Other demands responsibility from us because of its "nakedness" and "hunger:" we see the neediness of the Other and we are obligated to respond to it because we are "not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced [us]."⁵

Now if post-war French existential philosophy isn't your thing, let me translate. When we look into the face of another person, we can't help but see that she is a human being, which means that she, like all human beings, is hungry and broken in some way, in need of help, healing, wholeness. Once we see another's need, we can't un-see it and we shouldn't ignore it. As Levinas puts it, the face "presents itself, and demands justice."⁶ The face calls us to ethical action because it reminds us that we were all born into this world not as isolated, self-contained individuals, but in relationship with and dependent upon others, beginning with our mothers. To deny that we live in obligation to other people is to break our moral code. And Levinas, who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust, knew what the catastrophic consequences of such a denial can be. That is why looking into the face of another person is like looking at the face of God -- it commands righteousness and justice. "In front of the face," writes Levinas, "I always demand more of myself."⁷

I wonder what Levinas would say about the moment we're living in right now, as we walk around with our faces obscured by the masks we wear whenever we are in the presence of others. Ironically, our masks, and not our bare faces, are now the symbol of concern for and responsibility to the Other. We cover our noses and mouths, hiding a bit of our own personhood, in acknowledgment that ours are not the only faces that matter. It is a moral imperative to wear a mask, not to mention a health imperative and in many places a legal imperative, but it does raise the question: How do we see the face of the Other when we're all wearing masks?

A recent article in the New York Times explored this question quite literally. The answer: not very well. Several studies showed that, not surprisingly, people have a much harder time recognizing faces

² *Gilead*, 74-75.

³ *Totality and Infinity*, 207.

⁴ *Ibid.* 75-76.

⁵ *Ibid.* 219.

⁶ *Ibid.* 294.

⁷ "Signature" in *Difficult Freedom*, 294.

that are masked. In one study, “13 percent of participants struggled so much to recognize masked faces that they may as well have suffered from ... face blindness. Without masks, only 3.5 percent scored that low.”⁸ Another article points out how important it is to be able to interpret others’ facial expressions to aid social interaction, reduce misunderstandings, and help a group function efficiently and harmoniously. When we are wearing masks, we have a much harder time expressing ourselves and reading how other people are feeling.⁹ We feel less seen and less understood when we are wearing our masks, and therefore less connected to one another. We are not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually, distanced.

We’re spiritually distanced because “seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” If you’re having trouble seeing God’s goodness or feeling God’s presence in the world right now, you’re not alone. For many of us, God’s face has been hidden along with all of our faces. *Hester panim* - the hiding of God’s face - is an ancient Jewish idea meant to help us understand why God sometimes seems absent, especially in times of trouble. In the Bible, God’s hiddenness is the result of human wickedness, as the prophet Isaiah says, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; Your sins have made God turn God’s face away and refuse to hear you” (Isa. 59:2). Sin not only makes God hide God’s face, but also obscures ours. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra says, “Our sins are like veils upon our faces, hiding us from our Maker!”¹⁰ On this Day of Atonement, we should at least consider the possibility that our misdeeds are causing God’s face to seem hidden from us. The *machzor* reminds us that as we turn toward God in *t’shuvah*, the “veil is lifted from our faces and we no longer hide from our Maker. This is the precious moment when we reveal our true selves—and renew our relationship with the One who makes us whole.”¹¹ Our turning towards God is followed by God turning back towards us.

But there is another way to interpret *hester panim*, the hiding of God’s face. A famous *chasidic* story explains:

The grandson of Rebbe Baruch, Yechiel, was playing hide-and-seek with another boy. He hid himself well and waited for his friend to search for him. After waiting for a long time, he came out of his hiding place, but his friend was nowhere to be seen. It suddenly dawned upon the young Yechiel that his partner had not sought him out at all. The distraught child broke into tears and ran to the study of his grandfather. As the boy complained about his unkind friend, tears began to roll from the eyes of the Rebbe, and he said, “Indeed. That’s exactly what God says: ‘I hide myself but nobody wants to look for Me.’”¹²

According to this story, God isn’t hiding because human beings are wicked. God is just waiting to be found. God’s hidden face is an invitation to go looking for it.

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/health/covid-masks-face-blindness.html>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200609-how-face-masks-affect-our-communication>

¹⁰ Mishkan haNefesh, Yom Kippur, 94.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim, Early Masters*

As we embark on this search, we should probably temper our expectations. I'm almost certain none of us is going to actually see God's face. After all, remember, God doesn't actually have a face. And even if God did, we are still not allowed to see it. Even Moshe Rabbeinu, God's favorite prophet, only gets to see God's back, for "human beings may not see My face and live" (33:20). So, what can we see? Well, when Moses asks to see God, God offers instead, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you [My Name], and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show" (Ex. 33:19). We look for God's face when we look for traces of the Divine in our world in the form of goodness, grace, and compassion. These things do still exist, even when we are overwhelmed by the ugliness and cruelty around us. And of course, we don't just see disembodied Goodness floating around. Goodness, grace, compassion – all of these are abstract nouns until we, human beings, make them real. We are the bearers of these divine gifts. By honoring our obligations to others, we bring more of these divine gifts into being and make God's face a little less hidden.

In a remarkable book called *The Feminine Face of God in Auschwitz*, Melissa Raphael offers a rebuttal to all of the theologians and philosophers who declare that God was hidden or absent during the Holocaust. She suggests that "where women in Auschwitz, each in God's image, turned (in whatever sense) to face the other, they refracted God's face or presence into the world from the light of their own. Compassion was transfigurative. When a woman saw or looked into the face of the suffering other (and that other's filthy, beaten, vacated face, was not easy to see and to look upon) the divine humanity of that face could be traced through the thick scale of its physical and spiritual profanation.... What could be seen, but may not have been recognized, was God as *Shechinah* - the presence of God among us in our exile."¹³ She goes on to point out the many examples in survivors' stories of people taking care of one another in the camps, and the common theme of women wiping the filth from each other's faces.¹⁴ When we look at another person's face, see it and care for it and offer it compassion, then we see the face of God. We actually reveal the face of God. If our people could manage to look for and find the face of the Other in the hell of the concentration camps, surely we can manage it today.

My teacher Rabbi Eugene Borowitz used to say that riding the New York City subway was a spiritual exercise. He would look at each and every face - and if you've been to New York, you know how varied and sometimes strange those faces can be - and say to himself, "*B'tzelem Elohim, B'tzelem Elohim, B'tzelem Elohim.*" "In the image of God, in the image of God, in the image of God." I suggest we adapt Dr. Borowitz's exercise for our own time. When we walk down the street, wearing our masks proudly, we might take extra care to look into the faces of those we pass along the way, and remember that each person has dignity and worth and even a divine spark within them. When we are talking with others, whether at the grocery store or around the neighborhood, we might work a little harder to connect by being more expressive with our words and our body language. It's said that the Zulu greeting "*Sawubona*" actually means, "I see you." We don't have to speak Zulu to express that message when we

¹³ *The Feminine Face of God in Auschwitz*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 55.

say hello to one another. We can take more time to exchange greetings with strangers and with friends, to ask "how are you?" and to actually listen to the answer. But perhaps most important, when we pass by someone in need, someone with a face that we might very well want to avoid looking at, we can consciously choose to look him in the face. We can make eye contact, looking for the divine image in him and allowing him to look for it in us. We can acknowledge his need and respond with compassion and righteousness. Mask or no mask, there are ways we can see and reveal the face of the Other and the face of God.

We're all less visible these days, more isolated, more disconnected. But like God's hidden face, our masks are an invitation to seek and to be sought after. "Seek Me and live," (Amos 5:4) says God. And we say it too. We need each other now more than ever.