

Seeing Another's Face



Finally, we arrived.

After years of saving, a lot of planning, and a few Covid delays, we found a week when the five of us could all head west for a vacation.

The Pacific Ocean - an ocean we had never visited - beckoned. Its warm waters and weightier waves invited us in.

It was a perfect summer day.

The kids and I hit the waves with boogie boards and rode them for a good 45 minutes. Sharon was hanging out on the beach, polishing off her 9th mojito of the day... That's obviously not true.

Talya went back to the beach, followed by Matan, and after Ari took the boogie board back in, I stayed out to enjoy a few more waves and have them push me back to shore.

But the waves grew larger and stronger. Suddenly a riptide pulled me away from the beach. I wasn't that far out - about a hundred and fifty feet; but nonetheless, I realized I should *really* get back to the shore.

But as I swam in, the waves kept coming; the water kept pulling me back.

Whichever way I went, I wasn't getting anywhere.

I was getting tired.

I started to panic a bit.

Fear crept in.

I was alone in the water, and I could not see another person, another face.

Should I start screaming for help?

That would be embarrassing.

Was I really in danger?

I still thought I could get back.

Then, three larger and larger waves, one after another came, and I was struggling and seriously scared...

It's OK! I don't want to give away the ending, but I am standing right here! :-))

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That experience was one when I felt afraid and alone.

We all live our lives alone.

There is a fundamental loneliness to our existence.

While we are usually blessed with parents, and some of us enjoy the blessings of siblings, friends, partners, and children, we are still alone.

We live in our own minds; we think our own thoughts.

Each night as we go to bed, we are left to reflect - sometimes, we are kept up at night ruminating. Unfortunately, many of us can be caught in this cycle of insomnia.

At night, that loneliness can haunt us.

We come into this world alone and leave it alone.

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But while all that is true, we cannot survive by ourselves.

Beginning at birth, our very survival depends on others, a dependence that continues for years. We seek our mother's face, yearning to be seen, yearning to survive.

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The Torah opens with this understanding. In chapter two of Bereisheet, of Genesis, in the second Creation Narrative, an *adam* is created from the *adamah*. Most literally, "an earthling is formed from the earth."

This human being is placed in the Garden of Eden with unlimited food and water that does not depend on rain (in the water-starved Middle East, that was a big deal!). The land itself even contains precious stones. All these resources mean that the *adam* does not have to break a sweat working or farming.

Carefree days in the Garden of Eden.

Literally.

But the Garden is not perfect.

Even though everything has been, in God's assessment, "*tov* - good" or "*tov me'od* - very good;" in these Creation narratives, suddenly the Holy One declares that the situation is "*lo tov* - it's not good." "*Lo tov heyot ha'a'dam levado eh'eseh-lo ezer k'negdo* - it is not good for a human to be alone; I will make them a fitting helper. (Gen. 2:18)

A rabbinic midrash or commentary intriguingly develops this vignette.

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani taught that the first human being was androgynous - male on one side and female on the other - two faces that could not see each other.



Instead of the common understanding that God took a rib out of one human being, Rabbi Shmuel understands the word "*tzela*" not as "rib," but as "side," which is what it means every other time it appears in the Tanakh, in the Hebrew Bible.

Two sides of the same person are split, becoming two separate people that can love, hug, and support each other. *And*, they can see each other's faces.

Seeing someone's face has such power to bring comfort.

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Years ago, when I worked as a hospital chaplain, I came to visit an older woman. At first, she was frightened, "You're the rabbi! Are things that bad?"

After I explained that she was still stable, we talked. I visited her several times.

After a month, she was finally getting discharged. Thanking me, she shared: "I cannot tell you how lonely I have been here, but when your face would come into the room, it changed my entire mood."

Just the sight of another person can change one's emotional state, especially when we are ill or lonely.

That's why Rabbi Aha bar Hanina taught in the Talmud that a person who visits a sick friend takes away one-sixtieth of their illness. (Nedarim 39a)

While we usually cannot cure someone by visiting, lifting their spirits can bring a huge emotional uplift. We're not abandoned; we are not alone.

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As humans, we yearn to see another human face. Looking into someone else's eyes is intense; it can deepen a moment as nothing else can.

In A Modern Love piece in *The New York Times*, Mandy Catron experiments with The 36 Questions that lead to love, demonstrating that closeness and intimacy can be accelerated by two people asking each other a specific series of increasingly personal questions.



Mutual vulnerability fosters closeness. The final task is for the partners to stare into each other's eyes for 4 minutes.

Catron writes, "I've skied steep slopes and hung from a rock face by a short length of rope, but staring into someone's eyes for four silent minutes was one of the more thrilling and terrifying experiences of my life. I spent the first couple of minutes just trying to breathe properly. There was a lot of nervous smiling until, eventually, we settled in.

"... the real crux of the moment was not just that I was really seeing someone, but that I was seeing someone really seeing me. Once I embraced the terror of this realization and gave it time to subside, I arrived somewhere unexpected."

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Reflecting on this yearning, the author of Psalm 27 transfers this need to God. "My heart says to You [God] - 'seek my face;' It's Your face, Adonai that I seek. [And please] do not turn Your face away from me." (Ps.27:8-9)

I read this psalm as referring not simply to God, to seeing God or receiving God's protection, but also about our connections to others. We know we cannot see God or God's face, but maybe, just maybe, we can really see the face of another.

Perhaps it's not even a complete look, not the full intensity of another person, but just a glimmer, a hint. While we cannot know the depths of another person's soul, we yearn for that intimacy.

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Over much of the last few years, we have been able to hide our faces, to cover them with masks. And this has been helpful; I cannot tell you in how many meetings I had to yawn, and, masked, nobody saw!

Don't worry - none of these were shul meetings! OK, Maybe like, one or two meetings.



For some of us, the masks were helpful because we did not always want people to see our full faces. Some of us are shy, and the masks made it easier to be with other people.

I am still relearning what life is like with and without my masks in various situations.

And we should acknowledge how complicated it is - to wear or not to wear - how to balance all the complexities around masking; it's quite a challenge.

Long before this pandemic, showing one's face meant something powerful. There's a reason it's called a poker face - because the card players do not want to show that they have only a three and an 8 - you don't want to reveal your hand or your true feelings.

To show one's face, to really show one's face, is to make one's self vulnerable.

It allows someone to see through the exterior walls we build, and to say, this is me - this is who I am and what I am feeling. When we show our faces, someone can call our bluff or take advantage of us.

To show our face means to take a risk.

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When I think of the yearning to see a face, I am called back to Moses on Mount Sinai. Although he has been basking in the aura of God for weeks, Moses still feels lonely; he's missing something.

He asks to see God's *kavod*.

What is *kavod*?

It's not entirely clear.

It's usually translated as "presence," but like most Hebrew words, there are several connotations.

Weightiness, importance, essence.

So, Moses is asking God to allow him to see Who God really is.

God replies that Moshe can see the Holy One's *tuv* - God's goodness, but cannot see God's face; it would overwhelm Moshe, it would kill him.

But God allows a glimpse, telling Moses:

"See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and as my *kavod* passes by, I will put you in the 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." (Ex.32:21-23)

There's a lot to say about these verses, but it's clear that we humans certainly cannot fathom the Unfathomable.

And similarly, this can apply to people.

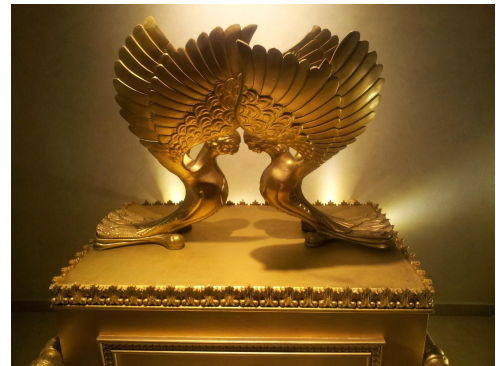
Sometimes, we cannot see them fully; we cannot fully take in another person. It's far too intimate, it's too overwhelming and we must look away.

To me, that is what's behind this narrative - not only can we not know God, but we also are unable to see someone else fully.

And sometimes, we don't allow others to see us.

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There is another passage in the Torah that relates to this idea. There were two cherubs on the top of the Ark of the Covenant - which housed the tablets of the Ten Commandments. While we may think of these cherubs as angelic babies, they are first mentioned as the guards, keeping Adam and Eve from returning to the Garden of Eden after their exile.



Whatever they were, they looked human and had faces. The Talmud offers different understandings of these cherubs (Debating, of course, is a classic Talmudic and Jewish activity!). Were they cherubs facing each other, or were they facing outwards?

And classical Talmudic, Tevye fashion, [accent] “you’re right and you’re right.”

They were facing both out and in.

When the people were following the commandments, they looked at each other, but when things were going awry, they looked away from each other. (Bava Batra 99a)

And the Torah says that God’s voice, the place where we can feel God’s presence most intensely, is right between these two cherubs.

We learn that when we are following the tradition, treating each other with kindness and compassion, it's represented by looking at one another. And in that space, that's where we hear God.

* * *



But long before Moses builds the Ark of the Covenant or stands atop Mount Sinai, there is his first encounter with the Divine.

Where?

At the burning bush.

That’s where God first speaks to Moshe. At first, Moses wants to see this awesome sight. But once he realizes what’s going on, that he’s standing on holy ground, that he must take off his sandals, that the God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is before him, Moshe turns

away.

וַיִּסְתֵּר מִפְּנֵי יְהוָה כִּי יָרָא מִהַבִּיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים

And Moshe hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. (Ex. 3:6)

Here we find a fascinating word for looking - *[mei']habeet* - [from] looking, from peeking at the Holy One.

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This *mabat* - this quick glance is what we have had for a few years. Just our eyes, what we could see above the mask.

But humans are also wired to see eyes. We can track where someone else is looking and almost see what they see by following their eyes.

So it's no accident that we quickly adapted to communicating even when we could see only the eyes of others.

We have evolved to appreciate the smallest changes in someone's eyes so we can tell when someone is smiling, even with their mask on. Our eyes pick up on the most subtle nuances; we can see the micro-expressions just from someone's eyes.

2100 years ago, the Roman statesman Cicero pointed out that "the eyes are the windows to the soul." Not only do our eyes allow us to see others, they reveal what lies within us.

And for some, it has been hard to return to full faces. A week ago, I was trying to say hello to a toddler who hid behind her mother's leg. Her mother explained that seeing new people's faces sometimes overwhelmed her child, saying, "she's a Covid baby." While this often occurs with young children seeing new people, especially grown-ups, these Covid years have intensified that feeling. It can be hard to see a full face.

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Over these last two and a half years, I have come to appreciate the gift of seeing someone's face - fully feeling that intensity. But I have also come to understand that sometimes it's still wondrous just to see someone's eyes, just a glance of their face.

The face of another can help us overcome the loneliness of existence. And while we can never fully know God or each other, we can still appreciate the magic of a glimpse, of a *mabat* - of a glance.

Sometimes, that is all we can get.

But yet those glimmers are amazing. The face of another, even just the eyes of another, can warm our souls.

* * *

But I don't want to leave you on the beach.

I finally got above the water.

And there, in the distance, I caught a glimpse of my son Ari. He was standing on the beach, watching my lack of progress in the water.

His *mabat*, his seeing me, changed everything.

I wasn't any closer to the shore, but I felt calmer.

Once I knew someone could see me and, in this case, my son, I knew I would be OK.

The feeling of panic receded.

I swam in a zig-zag pattern, and this time a wave came behind me, pushing me ashore.

Sometimes we just need to see another face.

May this be a year when our faces can be turned towards each other as we support each other and draw one another closer.

