



Eye Contact

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Parashat BeHa'alotekha 5779

Parashat BeHa'alotekha opens with the *mitzvah* to light the *menorah*, the lamp which illuminates God's tent which is pitched in the midst of the camp of *Benei Yisrael*. The concept of the *mishkan* is complicated. On the one hand, the *mishkan* is supposed to be God's home, as it were, and so it is modeled on a human home; many of its vessels reflect the furniture that would be in any house—a table, *shulhan*, a chest, *aron*, a lamp, *menorah*. However, the *mishkan* is not an ordinary home, it is a house for God, and God does not have any actual need for furniture! God does not eat at a table, have any belongings to store in a chest, and He does not need a lamp for illumination. Nevertheless, God *does* command that we construct furniture for the *mishkan* and His choice of furnishings is instructive. The *menorah* in specific teaches us an important lesson about how to be fully present to one another. And it gestures to the clearest way to demonstrate that presence and attention: eye contact.

According to Rashi, the way that the *menorah* was ignited teaches us about *why* the *menorah* needed to be lit. The verse instructs:

במדבר ח:ב

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יֵאָרִוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת:

BeMidbar 8:2

Speak to Aharon and say to him: When you ignite the lamps, the seven lamps should shine facing the [center of the] *menorah*.

Rashi explains why it is that the light of each of the six branches of the *menorah* needed to be inclined towards the center lamp:



רש"י במדבר ח:ב

יאירו שבעת הנרות. ששה שעל ששת הקנים, שלשה המזרחיים פונים למול האמצעי הפתילות שבהן, וכן שלשה המערביים ראשי הפתילות למול האמצעי, ולמה? כדי שלא יאמרו לאורה הוא צריך.

Rashi BeMidbar 8:2

The seven lamps should shine. [That is] the six¹ [lamps] that were on the six branches.

The wicks of the three in the east would incline towards the middle and similarly the three on the west, the tips of the wicks facing the middle. And why? So that they would not say that He needs its light.

Rashi's interpretation² notes that lighting the *menorah's* external lamps facing inward is actually quite strange and counterintuitive. It is a lighting scheme which minimally illuminates its environment! Instead of structuring the light to face outward, toward the empty space, the lamps of the *menorah* are arrayed in a way that illuminates the *menorah* itself and not the rest of the room. Rashi explains that the *menorah* is lit in this way in order to highlight that God is not in need of any light. Since God does not need the *menorah* for illumination, it can be lit in this way.

Therefore we can understand that since the *menorah* isn't there to be a light that God uses for Himself, it functions as a light that we have the desire to provide. The *midrash* understands that the *menorah* is lit by us and also for us, God uses our light in order to show His appreciation of our efforts and to honor us with His presence:

מדרש תנחומא (וורשא) במדבר ח:ו

זה שאמר הכתוב: גם חשך לא יחשיך ממך ולילה כיום יאיר כחשכה כאורה (תהלים קלט:יב). ולנו אתה אומר להדליק, שנאמר: בהעלותך את הנרות! משל למה הדבר דומה? למלך שהיה לו אוהב. אמר לו המלך: תדע שאצלך אני סועד היום, לך התקין לי. הלך אוהבו והתקין מטה של הדיוט, שלחן של הדיוט. כיון שבא המלך, באו עמו שמשין סבבו מנורות של זהב לפניו מכאן ומכאן. כיון שראה אוהבו את כל הכבוד הזה, נתבייש והטמין את כל מה שהתקין לו, שהיה לו הכל מן ההדיוטות. אמר לו המלך: מהו, לא אמרתי לך שאצלך אני סועד היום, למה לא התקנת לי כלום?!

¹ Rashi is clarifying that though the verse refers to seven lamps, that number included the lamp on the center column which is just lit straight.

² The emphasis on God's not needing any external source of illumination because He is the light of the world is inherited by Rashi through Midrash Tanhuma 8. However, it is Rashi's innovation to tie that concept to the way that the *menorah* is lit with the external branches facing the central column.



אמר לו אוהבו: אדני המלך, כשראיתי את כל הכבוד הזה, נתביישתי והטמנתי כל מה שהתקנתי לך, שהיו כלי הדיוטות.

אמר לו המלך: חייך, שאני פוסל את כל כלי שהבאתי עמי, ובשביל אהבתך, איני משתמש אלא בשלך. וכך הקדוש ברוך הוא כולו אורה, שנאמר: **ונהורא עמה שרא** (דניאל ב:כב). והוא אומר לישראל, התקינו מנורה ונרות.

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) BeMidbar 8:6

This is as the verse stated: **Even darkness is not dark to You, the night shines like the day and the darkness like light** (Tehillim 139:12) and you are telling us to light, as it says, **when you ignite the lamps!**

What is this analogous to? To a king who had a close friend.³ The king said to him, “Know that I will be eating with you today, go and prepare for me.” The friend went and prepared for him an ordinary chair⁴ and table. When the king came, his servants came with him, surrounding him with lamps of gold. When the friend saw all of this extravagance, he was embarrassed and hid what he had prepared [for the king] which was all just ordinary. The king said to him, “What is this?! I said that I was eating with you today, why didn’t you prepare anything for me?!” His friend replied, “My lord, the king. When I saw all of this extravagance, I was embarrassed and I hid everything that I had prepared for you, since they were all ordinary furnishings.” The king said to him, “By your life! I will discard any item that I brought with me and out of love for you, will only use what is yours.”

So too the Holy Blessed One is entirely light, as it says **light is with Him** (Daniel 2:22) and He says to Israel, “set up a lamp and lights.”

This *midrash* is consistent with the idea that God Who is entirely light is the source of His own illumination. The lamps that we light pale in comparison to the stars, moon, and sun. We feel this instinctively, we ask ourselves “why would God want to spend time with us, when He could be in heaven with the angels and the other perfect beings?!” When God invites us to light a lamp *for him*, an imperfect, ordinary light, that is a moment of God’s humbling Himself to meet us where we are and lovingly accept what we can offer Him. God “uses” our light because God is “playing” guest, creating an opportunity to be close to us. The oil and fire are of no significance to God, our lamp of gold is not impressive to Him, what is meaningful to Him is that we have set the table and lit the lamps for Him. The primary function of the *menorah* is not primarily functional. It is mood-lighting, creating an intimate environment for when we are close to God.

³ Lit. beloved, but the sense here is someone who the king likes and favors, not someone in whom he has a romantic interest.

⁴ Lit. couch, like in the Roman custom of reclining on a couch during a feast and eating off a small personal table.



The language of lighting the branches of the *menorah* facing the central lamp—**אֶל מוֹל פָּנָיו**—**הֵמְנוֹרָה יֵאִירוּ, they should shine facing** is reminiscent of language that is used elsewhere to describe God's intention of intimacy with us. In Birkat Kohanim, the priests bless the people on God's behalf. The language of an illuminated face appears in the central verse:

במדבר ו:כג-כז

כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: יְבָרְכֶה ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶה: יֵאָר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנֶּךָ: יֵשָׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם: וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם:

BeMidbar 6:23-27

So you shall bless *Benei Yisrael*. Say to them: God will bless and keep you. God will shine His face towards you and show you favor. God will lift His face to you and give you peace. And they will place My name on *Benei Yisrael*, and I will bless them.

God's shining His face towards us is a demonstration of paying attention to us and according to the Sifrei, this verse is specifically referring to contact between God's presence and our eyes:

ספרי במדבר פסקא מא

יֵאָר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ - יתן לך מאור עינים. רבי נתן אומר: זה מאור השכינה, שנאמר קוֹמִי אוֹרִי כִּי בָא אוֹרְךָ וְכָבוֹד ה' עֲלֶיךָ זָרַח (ישעיה ס:א).

Sifrei BeMidbar #41

God will shine His face towards you—He will give you brightened eyes. R. Natan says: This is the light of the Shekhinah, as it says, **arise and shine for your light has come and the glory of God** (i.e. the Shekhinah—DW) **has shone upon you** (Yeshayahu 60:1).

While Sifrei BeMidbar emphasizes that God's presence affects our gaze, the following *midrash* from BeMidbar Rabbah states that the most important element of the *berakhah* that we receive through the *kohanim* is the knowledge that God is engaging with us directly, peering at us through the openings that the *kohanim* create:

במדבר רבה יא:ב

בשעה שאמר הקב"ה לאהרן ולבניו: כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אמרו ישראל לפני הקב"ה: ריבון העולמים, לכהנים אתה אומר שיברכו אותנו? אין אנו צריכים אלא לברכותיך ולהיותינו מתברכים מפִּיךָ, זהו שכתוב: הַשְׁקִיפָה מִמַּעַן קִדְשְׁךָ מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבִרְךָ אֶת עַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל (דברים כו:טו). אמר להם הקב"ה: אף על פי שאמרתי לכהנים, שיהיו מברכים אתכם, עמהם אני עומד ומברך אתכם. לפיכך הכהנים פורשים את כפיהם, לומר: שהקב"ה עומד אחרינו. ולכך הוא אומר: מַשְׁגִּיחַ מִן הַחֲלוֹנוֹת - מבין



כתפותיהם של כהנים, **מציץ מן החרכים** - מבין אצבעותיהם של כהנים (שיר השירים ב:ט). **ענה דודי ואמר לי** (שיר השירים ב:י) - **ואני אברכם**.

BeMidbar Rabbah 11:2

When the Holy Blessed One said to Aharon and his sons: **So you shall bless *Benei Yisrael***. Israel said to the Holy Blessed One: Master of the universe, You are telling the priests that they should bless us?! We do not need their blessing, what we need is to be blessed by Your mouth. As it is written, **Look out from Your holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your people, Israel** (Devarim 26:15). The Holy Blessed One said to them: Even though I told the priests that they should bless you, I am standing with them and am blessing you. Therefore the priests spread out their hands as if to say, “the Holy Blessed One is standing behind us.” Therefore it says [that God] (who is represented by the male lover in Shir HaShirim—DW) is **watching through the openings** - between the shoulders of the priests, **peeking through the cracks** - between the priests’ fingers (Shir HaShirim 2:9). **My beloved responded and said to me** (Shir HaShirim 2:10)—**and I will bless them**.

These *midrashim* (taken in sum) teach that the greatest gift that we could receive from God, the greatest blessing is the exchange of glances, the making of eye contact. BeMidbar Rabbah goes so far as to state that God’s blessing would feel frustrating and perhaps not even worthwhile if it were not for this element. Good fortune could come to us on account of a blessing from a *kohen*, but the sense that God cares about us, that God is looking at and looking after us, that we matter to Him, can only come through the unmediated affection of God’s loving gaze.

The reciprocity at play in these two *midrashim* highlight one of the main reasons why eye contact is so uniquely powerful: it is by nature reciprocal. If you want to gaze into my eyes, you need to let me gaze into yours. The only way to get access to another person in this way is to give access to yourself. In order for me just to see you, it isn’t strictly necessary for me to look directly into your eyes, and in order for you to see me, the same holds true. Yet, in order for me to *feel* seen by you, eye contact is required. If you look at me and seem to look everywhere but into my eyes, it makes it seem like you do not want to interact with me, like I am not important and deserving of attention. Eye contact is for the sake of communicating, not for the sake of seeing.

The significance and the intimacy of eye contact highlights that there are different kinds of seeing. Eye contact derives its power from the mutuality, the willingness to look at one another directly. When this or any kind of looking is not welcome it becomes inappropriate



and violating. When the lover in Shir HaShirim peers through the windows and the lattices at his beloved, he takes a risk. If she loves him, she will return his loving gaze and they will see each other. If she rejects him, he needs to look away, lest he be found leering inappropriately at a woman who will not be his. Trying to make eye contact is so frightening not only because it exposes a person to the possibility of rejection, but also because it forces them to see that they are being rejected. How tragic that we often reject people accidentally, by not realizing what pain we might cause by looking away, by not being willing to engage and to pay attention.

God is not only gazing at us during the priestly blessing, but at every opportunity for conversation and prayer. The key to focus in prayer and to understanding what is truly happening behind the words is to imagine that God is looking at you, waiting for you to make eye contact with Him. Prayer is not about articulating one's needs but about channeling the vulnerability that having needs exposes and then gazing up at God and speaking directly to Him. As the Mishnah Berurah⁵ explains in the context of the laws of the Kedushah prayer:

משנה ברורה אורח חיים קכה:

כי כתבו בשם ספר היכלות ז"ל: ברוכים אתם לד' שמים ויורדי מרכבה אם תאמרו ותגידו לבני מה שאני עושה בשעה שמקדישים ואומרים קק"ק, (ולמדו אותם שיהיו עיניהם נשואות למרום לבית תפלתם ונושאים עצמם למעלה) כי אין לי הנאה בעולם כאותה שעה שענייהם נשואות בעיני ועיני בעיניהם באותה שעה אני אוהז בכסא כבודי בדמות יעקב ומחבקה ומנשקה ומזכיר זכותם וממהר גאולתם.

Mishnah Berurah Orah Hayyim 125:5

It says in the book of Heikhalot,⁶ "You are welcome by God, those [who dwell in] heaven and who ride on the chariot, what should you say to My children? What am I doing at the time that they sanctify and say, **Holy Holy Holy** (Yeshayahu 6:3)?" (And they taught them that their eyes should be raised to heaven, to the house of prayer and and that they raise themselves up).⁷ That I don't have any pleasure in the world greater than that time when their eyes are raised to Me and My eyes [look] into their eyes. At that time I grab on to My throne which has the likeness of Ya'akov and I hug and kiss it, and I am reminded of their merit and I hasten their redemption."

⁵ R. Yisrael Meir Kagan 1838-1933, Poland.

⁶ The Heikhalot literature spans many centuries and describes mystical ascent to God through a series of palaces, *heikhalot*. I was unable to locate the Mishnah Berurah's original source.

⁷ Referring to practice of rising to one's toes during the Kedushah prayer.



Even God who sees the whole world and Himself cannot be seen uses the experience of eye contact as a way of articulating what it feels like to have someone's complete attention, to feel valued by them, addressed by them, open to them. In a time of constant distraction and competition for looks and likes, let's take the time to truly see the people who really matter to us and make them feel seen by us. God furnished His home in a way that was designed for maximum intimacy between Himself and us; we should structure our lives to maximize the vulnerability and intimacy between one another.

Wishing you a Shabbat of gazing into God's eyes.

Shabbat Shalom

(מדרש תהלים (בובר) מזמור קיט)

"ישא ה' פניו אליך" – בשעה שאתה עומד ומתפלל.

exclusive - you can't make eye contact with two people at once.

Communication happens through eyes. Sanhedrin

Sanhedrin 36b)

ד,ג

מתני' סנהדרין היתה כחצי גורן עגולה כדי שיהו רואין זה את זה

כחצי גורן עגולה - בעגולה היו יושבין כדי שיהו כולן רואין זה את זה לפי שאם היו יושבין בשורה אין פני הראשונים רואין זה את זה ובעגולה שלימה אין יושבין לפי שצריכין בעלי הדין והעדים ליכנס לדבר בפני כולם שיהו כולן רואין את העדים ומדקדקין בדברים ולא שיהא פני העדים לשורה זו ואחוריהם לזו: רשי חולין ה.

שיהו רואין זה את זה - להיות שומעין איש את חברו ומתווכחין זה עם זה עד שתצא הוראה כהלכה שאילו היו יושבין כשורה שלא בעגולה אין בני ראש השורה רואין בני סוף שורתו וכעגולה שלימה לא היו יושבין כדי שיהא מקום לצאת ולבא:



Aino domeh re'iyah l'shmiya

סעיף יד[עריכה]משנה_ברורה_על_אורח_חיים_נה
⁵² מצטרף עמהם – דאף די ש הפסק מחיצה ביניהם כיון דמראה להם פניו דומה למה שמבואר לקמן [בסימן](#)
[קצ"ה](#) לענין זימון דאם מקצתן רואין אלו את אלו דמצטרפין וא"כ לפ"ז פשוט העומדים בעזרת נשים
ובמחיצה המפסקת יש חלון ומראה להם פניו משם מצטרף עמהם לעשרה וכ"ש דאם יש בלעדו עשרה
נחשב תפלה בצבור עי"ז ואעפ"כ יותר טוב אם בנקל הוא לו לירד לבהכ"נ שירד די ש מהאחרונים שחולקין
על עיקר הדין וסוברין דענינינו אינו דומה כלל לזימון:

