



Facing the Fire

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Parashat Ki Tissa 5784

Parashat Ki Tissa makes repeated reference to God's "face" when describing Moshe's communication with God.¹ But what exactly did Moshe see when he looked into the face of God? A comparison to Moshe's own use of parallel imagery later in the Torah gives us a fuller sense of the visual experience of revelation.

When Moshe enters the Tent of Meeting to speak to God, the Torah uses particularly intimate language to describe their dialogue:

שמות לג:יא

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים כְּאִשֶּׁר יְדַבֵּר אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ.

¹ In this essay I will only be considering instances of the word פָּנִים (or the contraction פָּנִי) that directly refer to a face. I will not, outside of the footnotes, be exploring the parallel language in the related prepositions: לְפָנֶי, מִלְּפָנֶי, מִפְּנֵי, עַל פְּנֵי, וּכְפָנֶי. It is surely true that we stand "before" someone in part because we stand "toward their face" (see for example, Avraham was still standing וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם עֹדְנוֹ עִמָּד לְפָנֵי ה' in Genesis 18:22), and there is very interesting work to be done in thinking about that parallel (think about the implications of the phrase דַּע מִלְּפָנֶי, for example). But the appearance of those orientation words in the Torah is so frequent it would be impossible to account for the implications in them all sufficiently in this space. My purpose here is to consider the especially frequent usage of the more literal word for face in this context in Parshat Ki Tissa.



Exodus 33:11

The Eternal spoke to Moshe **face to face**, just as a man speaks to his fellow.

The pause to offer this pointed reflection suggests there was something unique about Moshe's access to God. Indeed, Moshe's distinction as the greatest of the prophets will be described, in the last lines of the Torah, with similar language:

דברים לד:י

וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים.

Deuteronomy 34:10

Never again did a prophet arise in Israel like Moshe, whom the Eternal knew **face to face**.

But how are we to understand the phrase, “face to face,” when one of the parties is God? Is it just a metaphor? The extra emphasis of the simile, “just as a man speaks to his fellow,” pushes us to take the image seriously. Moshe and God spoke face to face, **in just the way** that two people speak to one another face to face. That implies that God has a face,² and Moshe has a face, and those two faces are turned toward one another, looking at each other. So Moshe must be seeing God's face!

² I am not, in any way, attempting to make the claim here that God has a human-like face, or even one that has physical properties—only that God has one. I do not believe anyone in Tanakh ever clarifies what that face is or represents, though the image returns again and again (in the priestly blessing for example). Indeed the whole point of God's message in our *parashah* that no human has ever seen God's face.

The one notable exception might be Ya'akov who, after wrestling all night with a mysterious man, names the place Peniel (meaning, the face of God), saying, “כִּי רָאִיתִי אֱלֹקִים פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצַל נַפְשִׁי” - For I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been saved” (Genesis 32:31). There's that exact language that we see used with Moshe in our *parashah*, except that where Moshe only speaks to God face to face, Ya'akov **sees** God face to face. However, one must take Ya'akov's description with a grain of salt. We have, after all, just witnessed him wrestle a “man.” It may be that he means to indicate—as Bereishit Rabbah assumes—that this was a divine being, and he saw **its** face, but that is not the same as seeing the face of God.

It could also be that Ya'akov's use of *Elohim* here, as opposed to *Adonai*, is the important distinction. Maybe one can see the face of *Elohim*, that is, a manifestation of God in the physical world, but not the face of *Adonai*, the ultimate and transcendent Force.

However, just a few verses further on in the same chapter, we are told explicitly that this is impossible. Moshe seems to still be lacking some view of God, because he makes this request: “הֲרַאֲנִי נָא אֶת כְּבוֹדְךָ”³ - Please, let me behold Your **Presence**!

This request is puzzling, for the Torah has already described the Presence (*kavod*) of God dwelling on Mount Sinai, and given a description of it:

שמות כד:יז

וַיִּמְרָא ה' כְּבוֹד ה' כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Exodus 24:17

The sight of the **Presence** of the Eternal was like a **consuming fire at the top of the mountain** in the eyes of the Children of Israel.

Yet God seems to understand that Moshe is asking for something more than just another glimpse of God's *Kavod*, for the response begins by outlining what **cannot** be seen:

שמות לג:יט-כב

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תוּכַל לִרְאוֹת אֶת פָּנַי כִּי לֹא יִרְאֶנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הִנֵּה מְקוֹם אֲתִי וְנִצַּבְתָּ עַל הַצּוּר. וְהָיָה בְּעֶבֶר כְּבוֹדִי וְשָׁמַתִּיךָ בְּנִקְרֹת הַצּוּר וְשָׁכַתִּי כָּפִי עָלֶיךָ עַד עֶבְרִי. וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת כָּפִי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת אַחֲרִי וּפָנַי לֹא יִרְאוּ.

³ *Kavod* in the Torah most literally means, “weight,” and is used initially in Genesis to refer to material goods, that is, to be “weighed down by assets,” or “carrying goods” (see Genesis 31:1). Soon it comes to refer to high status, or “honor,” for the one with great wealth begins to command honor (see Genesis 45:13, where it carries both meanings). Beginning in Exodus (16:7), it comes to refer to some perceptible manifestation of the “presence” of God (sometimes translated as the “Glory of God”), with the phrase כְּבוֹד ה', which then becomes by far its most frequent usage in the Torah. That presence is sometimes associated with a cloud (like the cloud on Mount Sinai, or the Clouds of Glory in the Desert), and sometimes—as we are investigating in this piece—with fire.



Exodus 33:19-22

God said, “You cannot see **My face**, for no one can see Me and live.” But God said, “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.”

There are, it seems, aspects of God’s being that Moshe can see—whatever is referred to here as God’s “back.”⁴ But God’s face cannot be seen. This is stated not as a prohibition, but as if it were a law of nature: No one can see the face of God and survive. The experience would be annihilating, even for Moshe.

But how can that be? Didn’t we just read, a few lines earlier, that Moshe did indeed look into the face of God—and did so almost casually, “like one man talking to his fellow”? That doesn’t sound like he was close to annihilation!

It pays to be precise in our reading of these images. If we review the descriptions of Moshe’s divine encounters, we find the Torah never says that Moshe “**saw** God face to face,” but that “he **spoke** to God face to face,” or that “God **knew** him face to face.” That suggests an orientation, but not necessarily a visual picture. Perhaps, then, he somehow faced God but did not see God’s face. How could that be? And what would he have seen instead?

Fortunately, we have a record of Moshe himself describing the face to face encounter with God—although not his own. In Parashat Va’Ethanan, we find Moshe looking back and using very similar language to describe the encounter that the whole people had with God at Mount Sinai:

⁴ There is a rich mystical literature investigating the meaning of the “front” and “back” experiences of Divinity. See for example the use of אַחוּרִים in the Tanya, Part I, Ch. 22.



Deuteronomy 5:4

Face to face the Eternal spoke with you on the mountain, **from out of the fire**.

The “face to face” encounter, it seems, was not Moshe’s sole privilege. As Moshe describes it, all of Israel were able to face God directly at Mount Sinai in the same way that Moshe spoke to God in the tent. Here, too, it does not say that they **saw** God’s face, but that God **spoke** to them “face to face.” If anything, they seem to have visually perceived only fire. God spoke to them, Moshe says, “מתוך האש” - from out of the fire.”

In fact, that phrase, “from out of the fire,” only appears in the Torah here in Moshe’s speeches in Deuteronomy, where he uses it a total of ten times in four chapters.⁵ He seems intent on describing the fiery visual experience that accompanies the voice of God during the face to face encounter. Again and again, he circles around the same three key points:

1. You heard God’s voice;
2. It was coming from out of the fire;
3. You survived.

One verse, in particular, contains all those elements, as well as an extra linguistic clue that Moshe is referencing his own experiences with divine encounter when he describes the shared experience of revelation at Mount Sinai:

⁵ Deuteronomy 4:12, 15, 33, 36; 5:4, 18, 20, 22; 9:10; 10:4. The only other place the phrase appears in Tanakh is the first chapter of Yehezkel, another place where a prophet sees “faces” of God.



דברים ה:כ-כא

וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַעְכֶּם אֶת הַקּוֹל מִתּוֹךְ הַחֹשֶׁךְ וְהָהָר בָּעַר בָּאֵשׁ וַתִּקְרְבוּן אֵלַי כָּל רָאשֵׁי שְׁבִטֵיכֶם וְזִקְנֵיכֶם. וַתֹּאמְרוּ:
הֵן הִרְאֵנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת כְּבוֹדוֹ וְאֶת גְּדֻלוֹ וְאֶת קוֹל שְׁמַעֲנוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה רָאִינוּ כִּי יִדְבֵר אֱלֹהִים
אֶת הָאָדָם וְחַי.

Deuteronomy 5:20-21

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, you came up to me, all your tribal heads and elders, and said, “Our God, The Eternal, has just shown us a God’s Presence, and God’s greatness, and we have **heard God’s voice from out of the fire**; we have seen this day that **a person may live** when God speaks.”

Once again, they “heard God’s voice,” and once again it comes, “from out of the fire.” But when Moshe quotes the people saying they “have **seen** this day that a **person may live**” (הָאָדָם חַי) when God speaks, that unique phrasing reminds of the contrast to God’s earlier warning that “a **person** cannot **see** [My Face] and **live** (לֹא יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי).⁶ The people, like Moshe, have survived a face to face encounter with God—but they never saw an actual face.

It seems, according to Moshe, that to be in face to face communication with God is not to see God’s face, but to hear a voice clearly and to see instead... a blazing fire. It is possible to look into that fire, but not to see beyond it—something like staring into the sun.⁷ The fire conceals the object emanating fire. And like staring into the sun, one can only behold that fire for a short time before it begins to damage the eyes and, if you come too close, to consume you entirely.⁸

⁶ There is one other instance of this exact phrasing in the Torah, in the oft-cited verse from Leviticus 18: “וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם - אֶת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְחַי בָּהֶם אֲנִי ה' - Guard my rules and laws, which a **person** should do, **and live** by them, I am the Eternal.”

⁷ See Ibn Ezra on Exodus 33:12, where he describes (and then rejects) R. Saadia Gaon’s position with exactly that analogy: והגאון אמר כי הפנים פני האור והמשל פני השמש.

⁸ Just as Nadav and Avihu, who “וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי ה' - came close **before** God,” and then, “וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל” - a fire came **from before** God and it **consumed** them who died **before** God” (Leviticus 10:2).

This imagery helps explain Parashat Ki Tissa's final description of Moshe's communication with God. The *parashah* ends with Moshe's majestic descent from the mountain:

שמות לד:כט-ל

וַיְהִי בְרִדְת מֹשֶׁה מֵהָר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִן הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו
בְּדַבְּרוֹ אֹתוֹ. וַיֵּרָא אַהֲרֹן וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו וַיֵּירָאוּ מִגֹּשֶׁת אֱלֹהִים.

Exodus 34:29-30

So Moshe came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moshe came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moshe was not aware that **the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with God**. Aharon and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moshe's face was radiant; and they were afraid to come near him.

Moshe's face is radiating with light because he has just been speaking with God. We now understand that process better. His face has been scorched by that blazing fire emanating from God's face. And just as the fire from God's face is overwhelming, so too, the glow of a face who has been touched by that fire has its own radiating light and heat. A *midrash* in the Tanhuma synthesizes these fiery images beautifully:

מדרש תנחומא יתרו טז

אֵת מוֹצֵא כְּשֶׁנִּתֵּן הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, הַכֹּל הָיָה שֶׁל אֵשׁ... וְהִסְרִסוּר נַעֲשׂוּ פִּיּוֹ שֶׁל אֵשׁ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
וַיֵּירָאוּ מִגֹּשֶׁת אֱלֹהִים

Midrash Tanhuma Yitro 16

You find that when the Holy Blessed One gave the Torah everything was made of fire... And so the face of [Moshe,] the Middleman, became fire, as it says: "and they were afraid to come close to him."

Moshe then calls to the people, as if to say: you can bear this. This fire you can survive, at least for a short time. So the people gathered around, and Moshe, who “commanded them with everything that God had spoken to him on Mount Sinai.” Then, when Moshe finished speaking, “וַיִּתֵּן עַל פָּנָיו מַסְכָּה” - he put a mask on his face.”

Moshe wore the mask from then on, to protect the people from the fiery glow of his face. But he would remove the mask, the Torah tells us, whenever he spoke to God, and whenever he spoke to the people. Torah, it seems, is meant to be given in fire. The words are transmitted, the commandments are recorded. But Moshe is also passing on some of that divine radiance, from face to face.

This final scene in Parashat Ki Tissa becomes the source for what the Talmud (in Eruvin 54b) calls the סדר המשנה, the procedure for teaching Torah. The Talmud describes how Moshe would teach a lesson in front of Aharon, who would then teach it to his children, and they to the elders, and the elders to the whole people.

Some of the fire from Moshe’s face, we may presume, passes onto Aharon’s face. And then it is passed, like a flame, from Aharon’s face to Elazar’s. The fire spreads through the faces of the elders. Soon all the faces of the people are lit up with Torah, and they continue to pass, not just the words, but the radiance of Torah, on down through the generations.

I have had teachers of Torah whose faces radiated some of that fire. They were so caught up with Torah that it animated them, blazed out of them. I looked into their eyes and I could see a wildness and a heat. Sometimes it scared me a little, and I was afraid to come too close. But still, I was drawn to that fire. It warmed me, maybe even singed me a bit. In certain moments, it was as if I could see, in the faces of my teachers, a mountain ablaze with fire.

