

Divine Gaze

After the fiasco of the golden calf, a resentful God said to the pleading Moses: *You cannot see my face, for no one can see my face and live* (Exodus 33:20). So says one ancient story teller:

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korhah that the Holy One spoke to Moses this way: When I wanted you to look, you did not want to. Now that you want to, I do not want it.

Perhaps Rabbi Yehoshua imagined that God had been brooding ever since Moses hid his face from the burning bush (Exodus 3:3). How could Moses snub an invitation to encounter God face to face?

Rabbi Shemuel disagreed with Rabbi Yehoshua. He insisted that Moses had acted correctly by hiding his face from the burning bush. In fact, the Torah records three rewards for Moses' act of hiding his face, one reward for each aspect of reverence captured in Exodus 3:6—*And Moses hid his face/ for he was afraid/ to look at God*. One word in each part of that verse tallies with each reward:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nahmani taught in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: As a reward for three acts Moses merited three things. As a reward for 'Moses hid/va-yaster his face' (Exodus 3:6), Moses merited a radiant face/k'laster after being in God's presence on Sinai. As a reward for 'he was afraid/yarei' (Exodus 3:6), Moses merited that the people were 'afraid/yire-u to approach him' when he came down from the mountain, his face aglow (Exodus 34:30). As a reward for 'Moses specifically being afraid to look/mei-ha-beet at God' (Exodus 3:6), he merited 'seeing/ya-beet the likeness of the Lord' (Numbers 12:8).

The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, brings another voice to the conversation. Amichai agrees that Moses should not have hidden his face. But the poet tells the story of Moses' regret, not God's. True, Moses was commanded to stand his distance and shed his sandals. But it was Moses' own idea to hide his face. From that moment on, says the poet, it was regret that propelled the career of Moses.

*Moses, our teacher, only once saw the face of God
and forgot. He did not want to see the wilderness
not even the promised land, but only the face of God.
He struck the rock in the fury of his longings
he went up and down Mt. Sinai, he shattered the two
tablets of the covenant and made a golden calf, he searched
in fire and cloud. But he remembered only
the strong hand of God and his outstretched arm
not his face and he was like someone who wants
to remember the face of a loved one but cannot.
He made himself a police sketch from the face
of God and from the burning bush and from the face
of Pharaoh's daughter who leaned over him when he was an infant in the basket,
and he distributed the picture to all the tribes of Israel
and throughout the wilderness. But no one had seen
and no one recognized. And only at the end of his life,
on Mt. Nebo did he see and die
with a kiss from God's face.*

For Amichai, Moses' career was drawn taut between *only once* seeing the face of God at the burning bush and *only at the end of his life* seeing it, again. The Torah records the outer story of Moses' inner quest. It was a personal search that impelled him up the mountain. With dashed hopes of seeing God's face again, he shattered the tablets he had gotten there. The poet even imagines that the shattered Moses made his own golden calf to try and give shape to his dim memory. But Moses could not neither sculpt nor draw on memories of the face that he was not permitted to see on the mountain.

You cannot see my face, God said to a pleading Moses who climbed the mountain one more time. For Rabbi Yehoshua, this was God's rebuke; for Amichai, it was Moses' disappointment. The poet goes on to say that with the second half of the verse, Moses' search came to an end: *no one can see my face and live*. And so it was that *only at the end of his life, on Mt. Nebo did he see and die with a kiss from God's face*.

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