

Chol Ha-Mo'ed Pesach 5780

Let Your Face Shine Upon Us

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11 April 2020



Psalm 67, which we read as part of the Festival evening service begins with the words: "God be gracious to us and bless us, and let Your face shine upon us." Most of us will be more familiar with the same sentiments expressed as part of the priestly benediction (Numbers 6:22-26): "May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May God's face reach out to you in tenderness, and give you peace."

The yearning for this most intimate blessing of God's face shining upon us, originates in the passage from Exodus (33:18-23), which we have just read: Moses said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" And God answered, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name *yod-hey-vav-hey*, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But," God said, "you cannot see My face, for no human being may see Me and live." And the Eternal One 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."

Why is it that we express our yearning for God's nearness in a desire to see God's face?

The Jewish thinker who most clearly articulated the power of the face-to-face encounter is the 20th century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Whereas philosophers in the tradition of Descartes worried that there is no reliable basis for establishing the full reality of other people — there being some unbreachable epistemological distance between us and others — Levinas argued that it is through the face of the other that their full reality, separate from us, but nonetheless unquestionably real, is established. The face is where we are exposed to the other, where we are most defenceless, expressive. The face is where we come alive to other people, and they come alive to us. This, for Levinas, is the basis of all ethics.

Considered in this light, it is most understandably that throughout the ages, ever since Moses, the Jewish people have had a yearning for the face – for the encounter with the Divine face but even more importantly for the encounter with other human faces. We are a religion of community and congregation – a people united by a common history and a common fate.

The early 19th century German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, like Levinas, identifies the encounter with another human being as the only way for us to glimpse the Divine. Only by entering a true relationship with another human being, what Buber calls the I-Thou relationship, can we reveal God's face and thus truly know God (the Eternal Thou).

So what does that mean for us at this time of global lockdown when we see hardly anyone face to face without the mediation of a computer or phone screen?

The Anglican priest and journalist Giles Fraser also turns to Levinas to ask: "whether the face of the other has the same moral charge when mediated via Facebook or Facetime

(significantly named) or indeed Zoom.” Fraser, who is most famous for resigning as Canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral because he would not sanction any policy of the chapter of St Paul's to use force to remove the Occupy London protesters based outside the Cathedral, wonders about the moral impact that the current restrictions on face-to-face encounters might have. He writes: “If Levinas is right that this is where morality is rooted, will the fact that we are conducting so much more of our business with each other through various forms of digital mediation serve to impede or disrupt the moral valence of the face of the other?” He quotes the psychotherapist Hilda Burke, who made the observation that she has found it so much more difficult to conduct her sessions with clients over the internet. The sort of clues that therapists pick up on, how people walk into the room, their facial expressions etc. are so much trickier to read over when digitally re-presented. And he responds to his question whether the moral valence of the face of the other is changed when seen through a screen:

“I don't know. But if the nastiness of so much social media is anything to go by, there is some reason to think that it might. And so, it is something we need to watch out for.”

Of course, Fraser is right to warn us of the potential dangers and remind us of the nastiness of social media that we talked about so regularly before Coronavirus changed our daily lives. And yes that nastiness does exist – until a few weeks ago we were all blissfully unaware of Zoom bombing – when strangers enter your Zoom meeting and disrupt it with racist, antisemitic and pornographic content.

And yet, I think we will look back at this time and note that we have learned something truly powerful about our ability to create community and build congregation reaching beyond physical separations. Our services are better attended online than they are in person and more people than in any other year participated in our NPLS Sederim. The same is true for all Reform and Liberal synagogues that I have been in touch with.

This Pesach, almost none of us succeeded in getting quite everything for our perfect Seder plate, we proved that communal singing on Zoom is impossible, but in their imperfections, our sederim, whether with the community or with family spread across households, countries and continents, were moving, engaging and allowed us all to connect face-to-face.

I do look forward to a time when during my sermon I will once again see the faces of my congregants rather than my own face staring back at me from a screen. But in the meantime, I find comfort in seeing you face-to-face, even if mediated through a screen – and your faces call out to me just as my face calls out to you and, if we just pay attention, in that connection we can, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, glimpse God's face.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – For this is truly God's will.

“God be gracious to us and bless us, and let Your face shine upon us”

אֱלֹהִים יְחַנְּנוּ וַיְבָרְכֵנוּ יְאֵר פְּנֵינוּ אֲתֵנּוּ סֵלָה: