

Shavuot June 1, 2025

One of the greatest mysteries in Judaism is God. Who is God? As Jews in our daily life, we do not often discuss God. It is possible to follow many mitzvot and Jewish observances without confronting the idea of God. When I heard Rabbi Dr. Artson talk about his 7 years as a rabbi who faced struggles in his life and as a result, could not acknowledge the existence of God, it was only somewhat surprising to me. This seemed like another shade of grey in an ongoing discourse through millenia on who is God. Is God looking out for individuals? Is God the force that made the universe and then turned his back on humanity? Is God the vengeful and jealous Jehovah portrayed in the Torah?

I am inspired by the mystery of God and because of this have always been moved by the several verses in Exodus Chapter 33 where Moses asks God if he can “see” Him directly.

This is particularly interesting as it occurs soon after the incident of the Golden Calf, the idol of idols. The Jewish people through history struggled to be monotheists and to cast aside idols. I think the Torah is saying that God can not be represented by a face, which would make him into an idol that could be reproduced by man.

Moses asks to behold God’s presence(verse 18) and God answers, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name יהוה, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show,” (19)

continuing, “But you cannot see My face, for a human being may not see Me and live.” (20) And יהוה said, “See, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock (21) 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.(22)

Then I will take my hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.

What do we learn about God from these words?

I will put you in a cleft of the rock

The cleft of the rock symbolizes a place of safety and protection. In the harsh and rugged terrain of the Sinai Peninsula, a cleft would provide shelter from the elements. Spiritually, this imagery conveys God's protection over Moses, shielding him from the full intensity of His glory, which no human can withstand ([Exodus 33:20](#)). God is compassionate and was protecting Moses. The imagery of Moses sheltering in the cleft of the rock with the raw, rugged terrain of the mountainous desert around him portrays that God provides shelter but is also embodied in stark beauty of nature.

God instructs Moses to shelter in the cleft of the rock and then covers him with his hand.

God covers Moses with his hand until he passes by. Moses encounter with God is like every human's encounter. It is a fleeting ephemeral connection. A momentary inspiration from the natural world or in our relationships with other beings.

Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen." God is personified by his back, contrasted with the term face presence. Instead of a direct encounter with God, Moses sees the traces of the divine, the afterglow of his radiance.

Joseph ben isaac bekhor Shor, Exodus 33:22:1 a French Tosafist who lived in the 12th century, who was in the school of rashi and practiced literal interpretations (psbat) commented on the phrase "when My glory passes."

"When My glory passes." It shall be revealed to you as I grow distant from you; it will look like when a man sees his friend - from afar and behind. I thought of walking down the road and way down the block glimpsing the back of someone moving. Is it a broom in a garbage can on the side of the road. Is it a person walking toward me or away from me. You see their back and only get a partial impression until you pass them and see their face. Alternatively, "My back" (Ex. 33:23) refers to what has passed, even though there is no back of the neck comparable to human beings who leave behind them what they pass. This seems to me the point, that Moses did not see the Divine Presence at all, rather he saw the rays of His light that He radiates from a place where He has passed, comparably to the sun - l'havdil - when it sets beneath the Earth in the west, and the sun itself is no longer seen but the rays are still visible, continually [weakening] as the sun grows distant. "But My face may not be seen" as in the morning, when the sun itself still has not risen, but the rays are already coming, continually strengthening as the sun grows closer. That is to say, you can see the rays that remain after I have passed there.

Just like Moses, we and generations of Jewish people, can experience the back of God, not all of God face to face. A beautiful sunset, a nature scene, in performing Mitzvot and benefiting from the kindness of others, those experiences in our lives are our glimpse of the back of God. Perhaps this is the reason, the practice of Judaism is in the details and it is those details that make up the Jewish people's relationship with God.