



## Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Ki-Tisa. Face to Face with God!

Can you meet God face to face?  
Yes you can!

Our parsha focuses on God's face and Moshe's face. The word פנים\פני appears 20 times, more than any other word, in this passage.

And here we encounter a certain paradox.

On the one hand

**The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another. 33:11**

On the other hand:

[Moses] said, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!"

God answered ...**"you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live."**

<sup>21</sup>And the Lord said, "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.**"

This is confusing. Moses can speak to God face to face (audio) but cannot see God's face (visual)

Please discuss:

- What does it mean to look someone in the face?
- Why might one be restricted from seeing the face of another?
- Why might Moses be permitted to see God's back and not His face? (What is the difference?)
- How would you differentiate between audio communication and in-person, visual communication?



At the close of the parsha, the Torah describes the three pilgrimage festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Again, it revisits the notion of God's face:

Three times a year all your males shall appear **before the face** of the Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel.

In other words, all Israel will appear before God's face three times a year, at the Temple!

Rabbi Prof. Joshua Berman discovered striking parallels between the Torah's laws, and the ancient legal texts written at the times when the Torah is given. He contends that the Torah uses societal metaphors to express the nature of the human-God encounter. Here is what he writes.

"We saw ... the treaty with the subordinate king Sunashshura, in which he was obligated to "come before His Majesty and look upon the face of His Majesty." Again, the visit of Sunashshura is a state visit replete with honor... a formal court appearance is referred to throughout the Bible as well as an act of "looking upon his face."

Yet precisely this language is used with regard to the common Israelite's obligations with respect to God. We find it, for example, in the stipulations of the covenant narrative of Exodus. "Three times a year," we read, "all of your males shall be seen by the face of the Lord" (Ex. 34:23)—referring to the duty to make a pilgrimage to the central shrine of Israelite worship. Nearly ubiquitous throughout the Bible is the notion that God may not be seen by mortals. Were they actually to behold God, they would die.

...Yet when seen in the context of the Hittite treaties, the meaning is clarified. The command that each Israelite male make a pilgrimage is patterned after the requirement that a subordinate king visit the court of his sovereign, to "look upon the face of his majesty." What is most instructive here is that this is enjoined **upon all adult males**—whereas in the Hittite political treaties, only the subordinate king is called upon to visit the sovereign. Indeed, it would be beneath the dignity of the sovereign to receive all of the common people subject to the subordinate king.

...By recasting the encounter between man and God as a covenant modeled on the political treaties of the surrounding world, the **Bible articulated a relationship in which honor could be reciprocally bestowed between God and the common man of Israel**, enacting thereby a reformulation of social and political thought of great proportion. The common man was transformed, perhaps for the first time in human history, from a mere servant of kings to nothing less than a servant-king, who stood in honor before the Almighty Sovereign. This elevation of the individual in the eyes of God may well represent the most profound political teaching, and most lasting political legacy, of the Hebrew Bible."

Please discuss:

- According to ancient Hittite documents, what is the importance of "looking upon the face" of a king?
- Who gets to "look upon" the king's face

Prof. Berman teaches that on a Holiday each man has an audience with God. In this way, each of us function as a king. We do not have our king represent us before God, each man himself stands before God and encounters Him.

- Prof Berman says that this might be the “most profound teaching” of the Bible. Why?

Shabbat Shalom!