

The Lesson of Not Seeing God

The next time one of our children wants to see God, let us not be alarmed. The child is not making a heretical request. The great law-giver Moses asked no less, and his words are recorded in the Bible unto eternity. He, too, craved to see God. However, God denied him that which he sought, and it is God's reply that I want to consider this morning.

God said that Moses would not be permitted to see His *face*, Only God's *back* could Moses behold. (*Exodus* 33:18-23) What is the meaning of God's "face" and God's "back"? Are we to assume that God is a physical entity whose front and back have a tangible quality so that the eye can view them if only God willed it? I need not tell you that our faith indulged in no such anthropomorphisms. What then is the meaning of these references to face and back?

One modern commentator suggests that God's back, which man may behold, represents the negative attributes of God, rather than His positive attributes. God permits us to understand what He is not, but we cannot fathom what He is. However, this interpretation is not acceptable for it is not altogether consistent with Judaism. We do believe that we know something about God's positive attributes as well as His negative attributes. We are to be merciful because He is merciful; we are to be just because He is just. (*Talmud B. Shabbat* 133b) Moreover, what philological link is there between the positive and negative attributes of God and the anatomical parts, face and back?

A much more astute commentator, the late Professor M. D. Casutto of the Hebrew University, is wont to regard God's back as representing the effects of His Being. Thus Moses was told that he would never fathom God as *Cause*. Moses would only be privileged to know God through His deeds, through His performance.

Philosophers may see in this explanation an echo of the view of the famous English skeptic David Hume, who first tried to teach us that no human being is able to fathom with his senses the reality of any cause. The most, said David Hume, that we are ever able to observe are effects, consequences, but we never see that which is the cause of the something else that follows. Cause is only a metaphysical abstraction of our imagination. Perhaps, according to Professor Cassutto, that is what God said to Moses. Moses would never be able to understand the full meaning of God as First Cause. The most that he and other humans might fathom is that which ensues because God is, and because man has faith in God. Yet, as intriguing as this interpretation may be, it still does not explain how the word “face” becomes the equivalent of “effect.” Linguistically our original problem remains.

However, friends, if we will go back to a much more ancient source, the writings of the immortal Maimonides, and not his philosophical work, “The Guide to the Perplexed,” but rather his legal work, the “Mishneh Torah,” we will discover that in the opening chapter of that work, in the section called “The Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah,” Maimonides gives us as perfect an explanation as one could seek. Maimonides tells us that Moses wanted to know God with certainty, with that certainty with which one identifies a friend or an acquaintance. Needless to say, we identify people best by beholding their faces. Faces are different. It is by gazing upon the physiognomy of a friend that one knows his identity with certainty. It was this certainty about the existence of God that Moses craved, but God said unto Moses that that certainty he would never have. The most that Moses could have would be that vague recognition of God that can be compared to our vague recognition of a friend whom we identify because we have seen his back. We identify such a friend because we are familiar with his stature, his gait, his form. Yet, when we identify a friend by beholding his back we are never really sure; we are only quite sure, or almost sure, but never do we have that illumination with regard to his identity that spells certain identity.

And this, friends, will help us to understand why it was after, and not before, the Jews had committed the sin of the golden calf that Moses made his request of God. Perhaps you, too, have asked,

why was it that Moses waited so long to ask God about His identity. Moses had communicated with God for many, many months prior to the account of the sin of the golden calf. Why didn't Moses make this request when God first appeared to him in the burning bush? Why didn't Moses make this request when he complained to God about the damage that God Himself had wrought by sending Moses unto Pharaoh? Why didn't Moses make this request on Mt. Sinai when God first indicated that He would give the Decalogue? There must have been some reason that provoked Moses into making the request precisely when he did, after the Jews had sinned. And, friends, in the light of the interpretation of Maimonides, we can answer this question. Moses realized that the Jews would continue to sin unless there were some way in which they could have certain knowledge of the existence of God. Only a few weeks earlier they had heard on Mt. Sinai that they were to make no idols and have no other God. Yet they flouted God's will and made a golden calf which they heralded as the god who took them out of Egypt. Moses knew the frailty of his people and he realized that unless there were a better way to make them solidly and unequivocally aware of God's reality, they would continue to commit the sin of idolatry. To protect his people against this sin, Moses pleaded with God to do something more, but apparently God knew better than Moses what was good for humans. God determined that man shall not live with certainty that He exists. Forever man would have to be a creature of faith. Man would never be indulged the gift of certainty by demonstrable knowledge. And that, friends, applies to all of human life. No matter how we try to avoid it in the area of the natural sciences or in the area of the behavioral sciences, in the area of law, or in the area of theology - no matter what the field of human endeavor - man is predetermined to live by faith rather than by that certainty that comes from absolute knowledge.

Now is not the time for me, friends, to engage in an excursus into all the realms of knowledge, but please take my word that any scientist who is not a pseudo-scientist, but understands his subject well, is very much aware of the fact that there is no such thing as absolute knowledge. There is no such thing as knowing something as a certainty. One of the greatest philosophers of our own day,

Morris Raphael Cohen, demonstrated that even in the area of mathematics which we always equate with pure reason, and always regard as a field which might yield certainty, there is no certainty. Even the symbols usually have meanings which are the product of environment. Thus there is virtually nothing that is not based on postulates, axioms and hypotheses, and with regard to none of these can we say of a certainty that it is absolutely true. The man on the street who knows neither science nor philosophy may think that science and philosophy are endowed with the attributes of certainty, but professional scientists and philosophers know better.

Colonel Glenn may orbit the earth in a capsule, and his is a brilliant achievement of man. However, he, and all those who prepared the way for him, relied on faith, on hypotheses and formulae, which they will revise as time goes on, but about which they will affirm nothing with the assurance that they are absolutely right.

Thus God denied us the capacity for absolute knowledge. Why did He do this? Why did He handicap us? Why must we live by faith alone? Friends, I think I know the answer. God knew man better than Moses did. If man were given the capacity for absolute truth, the capacity for certitude, man would be the most arrogant creature imaginable and there is no doubt that not only would idolatry persist, but man would dethrone God and substitute himself as the Creator. For the spiritual life of man, it was necessary that man be made to understand that he must forever remain the creature of uncertainty. Man must remember, as Schleiermacher once said, his creatureliness, his dependency upon God. Without this, man's arrogance would know no bounds. And while, friends, I will not speak of the arrogance of pseudo-scientists, I can speak of the arrogance of certain nations on the face of the earth. From my understanding of the political and social theory of the Soviet Union it is fair to state that there is no group of people that is as certain about the absolute truth of that which it affirms as is the Soviet Union; the Soviet Union is the most arrogant and self-centered of all the nations on the face of the earth. Arrogance is the hallmark of those who are absolutely certain, and God preferred to cripple us and handicap us with a limited capacity for knowing

so that we would always have to be creatures of faith. Compelled to rely on faith, we become mindful of our limitations; and perhaps basic virtue, at least humility, may also become ours.

Rashi suggests a similar thought in connection with the creation of Eve. (*Genesis* 2:22-23) God created Eve, not only because it was bad for man to be lonely, but rather because God feared that if man, unlike other animals, did not require a mate, the male species would be arrogant. Thus, in order that man might learn that he has need of, and is dependent upon, someone else, and cannot play the role of God, God made man dependent upon woman. This, too, was to reduce man to size, and for this identical reason God denied us absolute, certain knowledge and made it necessary for us forever to rely upon faith in every area in which we seek to advance human progress, be it in the technological sphere, be it in the ethical sphere, be it in the aesthetic sphere.

And that, friends, is the meaning of God's refusal to be seen. Oh, how we would have wanted certain knowledge! Oh, how easy it would be if we could tell our children, with a certainty, that God is seeable! Alas, like us, they, too, must walk the road of uncertainty, believing, believing, and never knowing that they are absolutely right, except because they have faith.

Yet, friends, as I explain this to you, some of you might be wondering whether it was fair for God to cripple us as He did. Was it fair to make us creatures of faith, instead of creatures of certainty? And to this, too, friends, I want to make a bold reply - God may have crippled us in one way, but He knows better than we that the power of faith can be greater than the power of reason. We talk of faith that moves mountains, and this, friends, is literally true. I want to pose this question to you. Let me ask you whether you do not believe with me that while it might be that with mathematics and physics, which come as close to certainty as anything we know, we could build a bridge, yet could anything other than the power of faith have built the State of Israel? What man is there who proceeding only with the relatively certain knowledge of mathematics and physics would have undertaken to reconstitute a broken people, and re-establish them in their own land after two thousand years of exile? How would anything that we regard as rational have supported the madness of a Herzl and a Nordau, a

Weizmann, and a Mohiliver? It was only through the power of faith that on the ashes of Dachau, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen, there could have been established that which it is now our privilege to behold.

And therefore, friends, God did not cripple us. Faith does give power and, in many respects, more power than does reason. God willed that we shall walk with uncertainty; but that did not mean that because we were predestined to be the creatures of faith, we were therefore to be impotent, without vision, without drive. Nay, faith can move mountains - it did, and it still does.

However, the existence of the State of Israel is only one instance of what faith has done in the case of the Jewish people, and this brings me to the magnificent portion we read this morning from the prophet Ezekiel - the Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. (Chapter 37) Ask yourself, friends, is there another people on the face of the earth to whom reason and experience would have dictated that they ought to perish? Is there another people on the face of the earth to whom reason and experience would not have dictated that they ought be embittered pessimists with regard to the future of mankind? Who has suffered more than the Jewish people? Who has had more cause for loathing mankind? Who has had more cause for despairing with regard to man's ultimate redemption? Yet, we have been a people of faith. We did not live by reason and experience alone. We lived by the very faith that moves mountains, and we believed with all our hearts that man was good and could become perfect, that human life was sublimely beautiful - that the destiny of man is a perfect world in which even the dead will be resurrected. By this faith we lived, and by this faith we survived. We defied the mandates of reason and experience, and we lived in the light of a force which has given our heritage and our national character the magnificent values which characterize them.

That is why I say to you on this festival of our redemption that we ought recapture faith, discover its overwhelming power and make our lives sublime and beautiful until the time when ultimate redemption will come. Amen.