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No Man Shall See Me and Live

Alex Maged ('11) | BronfmanTorah | Ki Tisa 2018

The following is a reprint from Alex Maged's blog *What's Pshat?*, which aims to make Torah study accessible to people with all different levels of Jewish educational and religious backgrounds. We thank Alex for sharing this dvar torah with us.

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In the third book of his mythological epic, Metamorphoses, the renowned Roman poet Ovid recounts the legend of a certain Greek hunter by the name of Narcissus. Narcissus is a sixteen year old boy of supreme beauty who happens upon his own reflection for the first time when passing by a fountain in the woods. For Narcissus, this is an ecstatic experience: never before has he beheld such a pleasant sight! In fact, the boy is so moved by his own appearance that he finds himself unable to tear himself away from it. And yet, the moment cannot possibly last forever. Narcissus eventually realizes this, and it sparks a crisis for him, because he doubts that he will ever find someone whom he loves as much as he loves himself. So he decides that he is not even going to try. Instead of returning to society, and subjecting himself to inevitable disappointment, Narcissus simply stays in place,

waiting patiently “till death shuts up [his] self-admiring eyes.”

There are many lessons for us to learn from the story of Narcissus. Among these, the most obvious is that it is dangerous to grow overly enamored with ourselves (i.e., to become “narcissistic”). Less obvious, perhaps, though equally insightful, is the notion that too much of a “good thing” is sometimes not a good thing at all. In moderation, beauty is a virtue. In excess, though, it possesses the capacity to destabilize, to overwhelm, and even to harm. Therefore we must know our limits, and we must carefully abide by them.

Of course, what’s true of beauty is true of other virtues too. It’s true of wisdom and it’s true of power and it’s true even of truth itself. Suppose, for instance, that Narcissus had possessed a more spiritual temperament; suppose that instead of casting his glance downwards, and gaping at his own reflection, he had—as Ovid put it earlier in Metamorphoses—“look[ed] aloft, and with erected eyes, beheld his own hereditary skies.” Let’s imagine that Narcissus even caught a glimpse of God Himself, as it were. What would have happened to him then?

Perhaps our Torah portion can shed light on the issue.

After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe Rabbenu ascends Mount Sinai to pray for forgiveness on behalf of the Israelites. Moshe also implores Hashem not to remove His divine presence from the midst of the people. Hashem, for His part, grants both of these appeals: “I will do this thing that you have spoken,” Hashem assures Moshe, “for you have found favor in My eyes, and I have known you by name.” But Moshe is still not satisfied. Instead of thanking Hashem for His beneficence, Moshe takes the opportunity to make yet a third request: “Allow me, now, to see Your glory!” he pleads. This is a bold request indeed!

What precisely Moshe hopes to “see” here is unclear. Though a literal reading of the verse would seem to imply that it is a physical sight to which Moshe refers, the sages of the Talmud appear to have understood Moshe’s supplication in metaphysical terms. Either way, Hashem resists Moshe’s advance. “You will not be able to see My

face," He insists, "because לא יראני האדם וחי." Simply translated: "for man shall not see Me and live."

How are we to parse this ominous phrase, "shall not…live?" Among traditional commentators, it is the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban who provide what it is arguably the most natural reading of these words. Ibn Ezra explains that the man who "sees" Hashem, as it were, will "die immediately." Ramban takes it a step further, contending that "even before man 'sees' Hashem he will die, i.e., his soul will depart from him." Leaving aside their differences on the issue of whether it is technically possible to "see" Hashem, even for a fleeting moment, what we find is that both commentators render the phrase "shall not live" to mean, in effect, "shall die." Indeed, it would be difficult to conceive of a reading more straightforward than this one.

There is, however, one difficulty with this interpretation. If Hashem wished to communicate that whoever sees Him "shall die," then why didn't He state explicitly, "you shall die"—why take the roundabout route, providing no more than vague allusions to the fact that Moshe "shall not live?" The Torah, after all, is not wont to resort to this sort of circumlocution; when it needs to warn someone that his or her life is in danger, it does so without hiding behind any euphemisms. Thus, for instance, Hashem instructs Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, "for on the day that you eat of it, you shall die." Likewise, He cautions the Israelites before the giving of the Torah that "anybody who touches the mountain shall be put to death." Even to Aaron, the Kohen Gadol, Hashem states: "Do not come at any time [you please] into the Holy, within the dividing curtain… so that [you] do not die." Indeed, the Israelites themselves acknowledge the perils of approaching the sanctuary uninvited: "Whoever comes close to the Tabernacle shall die!" they cry out. And when, later in Tanach, Manoah encounters an angel of Hashem, he leaves no room for doubt about the end he expects to meet, either: "We shall surely die!"

In each of these instances, the fate that awaits one who violates a given divine boundary is clearly and unambiguously labelled "death." Yet in our Parshah, Hashem deliberately avoids invoking the language of "death;" instead He uses the

oblique expression, “shall not live.” The sense we get, then, is that the consequence for “seeing the glory Hashem” is not “death” of a strictly biological sort. It is something subtler and more insidious. No, Hashem intimates—it will not necessarily “kill you” to look too deeply into My essence. And yet, “no man shall see Me and live:” though he who comes face-to-face with the divine need not die, he cannot continue “living,” either. For such a person, normal life, in the conventional sense of the term, is impossible.

Perhaps it is this idea that the Talmudic sage R. Yochanan was alluding to in his cryptic statement, recorded in masechet Megillah:

Hiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Yochanan: Had there been in the cave in which Moshe and Eliyahu stood a chink no bigger than the eye of a fine needle, they would not have been able to endure the light, as it says, “for man shall not see Me and live."

At face value, the purpose of this Midrash is to draw a parallel between two of Tanach’s well-known “revelation narratives:” Hashem’s revelation to Moshe, recounted in our Parshah, and Hashem’s revelation to Eliyahu, recounted in the biblical book of Melachim. The basis for connecting these narratives is that the revelation to Eliyahu occurs at Mount Horev—another name for Mount Sinai—and that in both accounts, Hashem’s presence is said to “pass over” the prophet while the prophet himself resides in “a cleft of the rock,” or a “cave.” In light of these similarities, R. Yochanan deduces that the verse “for man shall not see Me and live”—which appears only in our Parshah—applies equally to the episode in Melachim. Thus, he concludes: “had there been in the cave in which Moshe and Eliyahu stood a chink no bigger than the eye of a fine needle, they would not have been able to endure the light…” It is a brilliant bit of Biblical exegesis.

Yet that is not all it is. For there is, in fact, a second layer to this Midrash: a layer at which the echoes resonate not from Tanach, but from within the Talmud itself. After all, we find in the rabbinic tradition yet another aggadah in which the images of caves, light, and the character of Eliyahu HaNavi feature prominently. It is the tale of R. Shimon b. Yochai and his son, R. Eleazar:

[R. Shimon and R. Eleazar] went and hid in a cave [because the Roman emperor had issued a decree against their lives]…They would strip their garments and sit up to their necks in sand. The whole day they studied [Torah]; when it was time for prayers they robed, covered themselves, prayed, and then put off their garments again, so that they should not wear out. Thus they dwelt twelve years in the cave. Then Eliyahu came and stood at the entrance to the cave and exclaimed, "Who will inform the son of Yohai that the [Roman] Emperor is dead and his decree [against R. Shimon] is annulled?" So they [understood and] emerged. Seeing a man ploughing and sowing, they exclaimed, 'They forsake eternal life [i.e. holy pursuits] and engage in temporal life [i.e. mundane activity]!' Whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burnt up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and cried out, 'Have ye emerged to destroy My world? Return to your cave!' So they returned and dwelt there twelve months, reasoning, 'The punishment of the wicked in purgatory is [limited to] twelve months.' A Heavenly Echo then came forth and said, 'Go forth from your cave!' Thus, they emerged. And whatever R. Eleazar damaged [with his eyes], R. Shimon healed. Said he to him, 'My son! You and I are sufficient for the world.' [Then], on the eve of the Sabbath before sunset, they saw an old man holding two bundles of myrtle and running at twilight. 'What are these for?' they asked him. 'They are in honour of the Sabbath,' he replied…. Said [R. Shimon] to his son, 'See how precious are the commandments to Israel.' Thereupon their minds were put at ease.

Like Moshe and Eliyahu, R. Shimon and his son, R. Eleazar, withdraw to a cave and experience an intense encounter with the divine. For twelve years, they immerse themselves in nothing but prayer and mystical meditation. At the end of this period, Eliyahu HaNavi arrives to announce that it is safe for them to emerge from hiding. The rabbis do so, but grow indignant upon discovering individuals who do not share their enlightened way of life—individuals who neglect Torah study in order to earn a living. So angry are the rabbis, in fact, that whatever they set their gaze upon immediately bursts into flames; to eyes that have beheld Hashem in all His glory, the sight of secular civilization is suddenly intolerable. It is at this point

that Hashem intervenes: recognizing that the masses “cannot endure the light” of the rabbis (to borrow R. Yochanan’s phrase), He sends them back to the cave, where they spend twelve months in silence and solitude. Yet even this measure does not cure the rabbis entirely. Upon exiting the cave for the second time, R. Eleazar continues to wreak “damage” with his eyes. R. Shimon, for his part, comes to believe that “you and I are sufficient for the world.” Only when the two happen upon a simple Jew, rushing before sunset to honor the Shabbat, is their faith in humanity partially restored.

By no coincidence is it Eliyahu, specifically, who guides the rabbis’ re-entry into society. Eliyahu is the Jewish tradition’s quintessential zealot. Like R. Shimon, and like R. Eleazar, Eliyahu rails at the Israelites for their lack of religious conviction; and, like them, his stare alone has the power to set aflame anybody who has failed to reach his elevated state. “I have been a zealot for Hashem!” declares Eliyahu, proudly and defiantly, atop Horev. But when Eliyahu learns that nobody shares his zeal, it is “too much” for him to bear: “take my soul,” he demands Hashem, for “[I] wish to die.” The prophet has “seen the light”—but it has blinded him from seeing anything else. Now that his “eyes have been opened,” he “can never go back.” Thus, he opts for the fate of Narcissus: he chooses the loneliness of death over the community of imperfect life.

And so we return to this week’s Parshah. לא יראני האדם וחי, Hashem exhorts Moshe: one who focuses too intently on the grandeur of God risks losing his ability to find beauty in a flawed humanity. By fixating exclusively on “eternal life,” such a person may forget how to lead his “temporal life” in a way that is healthy and wholesome. For good reason, then, does the Torah, in its command to “be holy,” address itself towards the people of Israel as a collective: “Holy shall you—plural—be, for holy am I Hashem, your God.” It is noble to dwell upon the unity of God. But it is only so when one dwells in unity with all of God’s creatures.

That is why Hillel, in the Mishnah, encouraged us to “love all life”—not all Torah scholars; not all Jews; but all life. And that is why Hillel taught us “not to remove yourself from the community”—the word “community,” in Hebrew (ציבור), comprising an acronym of צדיקים, בינונים ורשעים: the righteous, the ordinary, and the wayward alike. Our spiritual growth must open us to others, not close us off from them. It must bring us together, not tear us apart. And it must move us to increase our sensitivity, our empathy, and our care for those who struggle (or who decline) to connect to Hashem in the way that we do—not, chas v’shalom, the opposite.

To “see” God from within a cave: that is holy. To see the tzelem Elokim—the spark of God—within each and every human being: that is the Holy of Holies.

Shabbat shalom!

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