



5 thoughts

on face-to-face interactions

The Torah tells us that Moses spoke with the Lord 'face to face' and that afterwards his face 'shone'. The human face can be revealing of a person's inward spiritual depths. Can you recall a time when you saw the Lord's love radiant in the face of another? In our everyday interactions, how can we consciously use our faces more deliberately to communicate love, encouragement, hope, shalom? Take up a discussion around this topic. As a starter, five thoughts follow:

1. Recall how scripture speaks of the Lord's 'face' as being 'turned' toward or away from his people; e.g., 'The Lord make his face to shine upon you' (Num. 6:25). Note the biblical terror of the hidden face of God (e.g., Deut.31:18; Psalm 27:9; Job 34:29; Isa. 64:6).
2. Lovers readily look into each other's eyes. By contrast, when feeling distant from someone we tend to look away from or 'past' him/her. The painful image of the hidden face of God has a human parallel in faces 'hidden' or turned from one another.
3. When we speak face-to-face with someone, we usually understand so much more through their non-verbal cues than we can gain in an email or text or phone communication.
4. Think of how the *lack* of face-to-face communication can exacerbate a conflict; how a person or group can be demonized in their physical 'absence'; or ignored (out of sight, out of mind).
5. Consider how apt are expressions such as: 'to *face* into' a difficult issue; or, 'It was written all over his *face*.' And what comment might we make about 'Facebook'??



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 30:11—34:35

Ki Tisa:
'when you add'

Why reflect on Torah?

"A fundamental question [in Christian-Jewish relations today] is the sheer ignorance that many Christians and Jews have about each other. A crucial task is to increase our mutual knowledge, and so enhance mutual respect."

Thomas Casey SJ, Director,
Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, Rome.

Christianity emerged from Judaism, and Judaism remains the rich soil in which our church is planted. Two thousand years later, after centuries of estrangement between the two religions, the church is faced with the task of reconciling with the Jewish people, appreciating their unique role in salvation history, and learning from their wealth of biblical reflection.

Where does one start? *Light of Torah* is one practical response. It is a resource that encourages parishioners to read the Hebrew scriptures, specifically the first five books of the bible (the *Torah*), with attention to Jewish interpretative methods. In this way, we put into practice the church's expressed wish that 'what ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament' (*Cardinal Ratzinger, Foreword to PBC document, 2001*).



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 30:11–34:35

Our Torah portion is filled with tension. The idolatrous golden calf episode stirs up God's wrath. Moses smashes the stone tablets of the covenant, then enters into a daring act of diplomacy on behalf of Israel. God relents and the tablets are refashioned and brought to the people.

Our focus here is the closing verses of our Torah portion. As Moses descends from the mountain, "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." Read carefully Exodus 34:29-35.

Tasting Torah

"Moses did not know the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them..." (Exodus 34:29-31).

What questions come to mind as you read 34:29-35? With the sages, perhaps you find yourself wondering: Why is Moses unaware of his transfigured appearance? And why does it instill fear in Aaron and the Israelites? What insights arise from your discussion with your havrutah partner?

Touching Torah

Recall that Moses has just spent forty days and forty nights in intense communication with the Lord, taking neither bread nor water [34:28]. In creative ways the sages comment on Moses' heightened spiritual state, some saying that it indicates a great degree of humility. Says the *Or Hahayyim*,¹ so focused was Moses on the meaning of the stone tablets he held in his arms that he presumed that the radiance was coming from the tablets—i.e., the light of the Torah.

But why would divine radiance reflected in a humble man cause the people to recoil? And why would Moses feel the need to put a veil over his face? Continue to ponder in havrutah (noting, too, allusions to Moses in the Gospel story of Jesus transfigured; cf. Mt 17:1-13).

Depthing Torah

For Rashi,² the Israelites' fear is a product of their sinfulness in relation to the golden calf. Before the calf the people were able to stand in the presence of the Lord's glory (Exod. 24:17). Now their conscience has been pricked and they have trouble just looking into the face of an intermediary of that glory.

But Moses calls to them in a spirit of acceptance. Some commentators compare this scene to the Genesis scene (45:3-4) where Joseph calls to his sinful, fearful brothers in a gesture of reconciliation.

Further, the verses that deal with the veil suggest a delicate discernment on the part of Moses. When speaking with the Lord and communicating with the people about matters of Torah, he allows the radiance upon his face to be visible to all. However in everyday activities he covers his face so as not to distract and overpower the people who presumably are not in the same spiritual 'space' as he. Moses is endowed with an exceptional gift, but he is discerning in how he uses that gift for the benefit of the people.

Doing Torah

Continue to ponder Moses' radiance. Count the number of times 'Moses' is repeated (11x in the Hebrew; 3x in the final verse). Rashi notes that repetition of a name in a single verse signals a special affection for the one named. Do you sense an affection for Moses building as our Torah portion draws to a close?



Faith & Life

What can Moses' decision to veil/unveil teach us about expressing our own God-given gifts? Are there times when it is wiser to 'tone down' our zeal and enthusiasm out of sensitivity to others? Then again, bold expression of our values is essential to the life of faith. With reference to the text, share how you live this tension.

1. Or Ha-hayyim: Torah commentary by the Moroccan Jewish scholar Hayyim Ibn Attar (1696-1743).
2. Rashi: 11th c., France.

Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Shemos* (NY, 1994).
Scripture: NRSV.