

Why Can't We See God's Face?

Chol Hamoed Sukkot
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"You may not see my face and live" teaches us that all of our names, concepts, and images of God are inadequate to capture the full truth. God's complexity transcends all our categories. Thus, Judaism teaches something rather amazing. Neither the believer nor the non-believer knows the absolute truth about God. No one gets to say the final word. Whatever our conclusions about God, whether they be that of a believer, an agnostic, or an atheist, they should be tempered with humility.

When I was a child, I distinctly remember asking my grandmother what did God look like. My grandmother promised to go down to S. Klein's department store in downtown Newark and buy me a picture of God.

A month went by and there was no picture from Klein's department store. I asked my grandmother what happened to the picture. She finally conceded that she could not buy me a picture of God. Although my grandmother should never have promised what she couldn't deliver, she taught me the principle underlying the fascinating Torah portion for this Shabbat.

Here's the context. Moses has just asked for a visible manifestation of God's presence. Seeing is believing, and like me, Moses wanted to see God's face. Moses wanted a picture of God. Let's read God's response. The Torah instructs "You may not see God's face and live."

Why can't we see God's face? On the simplest level, we can't see God's face because God has no face. God is real but not material. God has no physical form or shape. Furthermore, according to Maimonides, the greatest Jewish theologian of the middle ages, God cannot possibly be humanlike or resemble anything we know from human experience. If that were true, God would not be God. God would not be unique and incomparable. God would not be One as the *Shema* proclaims.

So we must understand, teaches Maimonides, that all the human images we compare God to – father or mother, king or shepherd – are not definitions of God, just metaphors for God. They do not capture all that God is. They only point in God's direction.

Indeed, as far back as the 12th century, the medieval Jewish theologians had already come to the conclusion that God's true nature, God's essence, is ultimately unknowable,

inaccessible to the human mind. There are limits to what we can know and say about God.

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In a roundabout way, I guess that was what my grandmother was trying to teach me.