



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Ki Tissa

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 18, 2011

Ki Tissa

Two Sermons

1) Intimate Secrets Page 1

2) Strength in Suffering Page 14



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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Shemot > Ki Tissa > Intimate Secrets

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ABSTRACT

Is there anything we can do to repair a broken relationship?
How can we make amends after a betrayal?

None of us are immune to challenges in our personal relationships. The old idiom goes that a marriage without an occasional argument is a bad sign. But what happens when the arguments dominate and overwhelm the bond? Sometimes relationship challenges can be quite serious. Betrayal or other severe transgressions can put a terrible strain on a marriage and even destroy the union. Can we mend a relationship that has been broken? Can we rediscover love after it has been compromised?

You may be surprised to learn that this week’s Torah reading answers this question with an unequivocal yes! Moreover, it actually teaches us methods how to rebuild a shattered relationship.

Barely 39 days after they heard the commandment not to worship false gods, the Jewish people built the Golden Calf. God was understandably unforgiving over this blatant betrayal. But then...

Enter Moses to offer us a rare - once in history - glimpse into the intimate secret of communicating with God as he beseeches that God forgive and reconcile with the people.

In a deeply moving and fascinating dialogue, Moses probes the inner workings of God. “Show me Your face,” Moses implores. And God responds and ultimately forgives.

The dialogue between Moses and God contains many powerful lessons for forging an intimate relationship with God and for mending our human relationships that may have been inadvertently damaged or estranged.

This sermon explores ten such lessons, including: 1) why total disclosure is important, 2) how to see the face of your beloved, 3) what it takes to heal, and more...

**INTIMATE SECRETS:
TEN LESSONS FOR MENDING A BROKEN RELATIONSHIP**

1. Quips about Relationships (Humor)

Since today we are going to be talking about how to cull from the encounter between God and Moses some important lessons for mending a broken relationship, I thought to begin with a bit of humor about relationships:

- Marriages are made in heaven. But, so are thunder and lightning.
- Married life is very frustrating. In the first year of marriage, the man speaks and the woman listens. In the second year, the woman speaks and the man listens. In the third year, they both speak and the neighbors listen.
- When a man opens the door of his car for his wife, you can be sure of one thing – either the car is new or the wife is.
- Marriage is when a man and woman become as one; the trouble starts when they try to decide which one.
- A man is incomplete until he is married. After that, he is finished.

Those of you who laughed ... this was a test, and you are in trouble now.

Okay, let's get serious...

2. Like a Close Friend

There is something about this week's Torah reading that has always touched me in a very powerful way.

It contains perhaps the most intimate description you will ever find of a human being's interaction with God, for we are told that "God would speak to Moses face to face, like a person speaks to a close friend."¹

But, while this was happening atop Mount Sinai - where Moses had climbed to receive the divine mandate called the Torah - down below the Israelites were engaged in just the opposite. Down below, they were building the Golden Calf.

When, after 40 days, Moses finally descended with the Ten Commandments and saw this travesty, he shattered the two stone tablets which contained them.

3. How to Mend All Broken Relationships

Moses then returned to the top of the mountain again to beg God's forgiveness.

And here is where a most fascinating conversation ensued - an intimate, deeply personal conversation.

Every aspect of this conversation contains myriad of lessons how to face difficult situations and how to connect with God - lessons that can be applied to mending all types of relationships. We will examine some of these lessons now.

¹Exodus 33:11.

4. Make Total Disclosure

Lesson One: Make Total Disclosure

Having returned to the top of Mount Sinai, Moses begins immediately with total acknowledgment of the crime: “The people have committed a terrible sin by making a golden idol.”²

This teaches us that trust is built not on perfection but on accountability. When you have made a mistake (or even committed a crime of betrayal), you can’t go into denial or try to cover-up. You can’t begin with excuses and explanations. You must state plainly and clearly that a wrong has been done, and you are responsible.

Once the sin has been fully acknowledged with no excuses, the wronged party is that much more likely to see that you are accountable, and thus worthy of forgiveness.

5. Have the Courage to Heal

Lesson Two: Have the Courage to Heal

Note that Moses does not shrink away with guilt or fear over the fact that the people had perpetrated such a serious transgression. Many others would have given up, feeling totally hopeless and not knowing how to make amends and win forgiveness.

It takes courage not to sink into resignation and to make an effort at healing the damage to the relationship, especially after a grave sin that leaves the offender overwhelmed with guilt and shame. (It is true that Moses did not commit the sin, but he so completely identified with the people that he carried their guilt and shame on his shoulders.)

So, after total disclosure must come the strength and conviction to heal.

² Exodus 32:31.

³ Exodus 32:32.

We see that Moses has both, when he tells God: “Now, if You would, please forgive their sin.”³ In the way he says it, he expects a positive response.

6. Self Sacrifice

As a true selfless leader Moses does not disassociate himself from the sinful people – something that he could have easily done as he was not to blame for their sin.

And God gives him the chance to disown them. God even gives him the opportunity to build a new nation. However, in his great love for the people and total conviction that God loves them, Moses does not take the easy way out. He stands up to God and brazenly states: “If not [that is, if you don’t forgive them], You can erase me from the book that You have written.” “If You destroy them, destroy me as well!”

You might think that the conversation would end at that point. If someone tried to convince you to pardon your straying spouse in the way Moses tried to convince God to forgive the Jews’ betrayal, would you continue to listen?

But not only does the conversation continue, it intensifies into one of the (if not the) most intimate conversations you will ever hear in your life.

God at first refuses to forgive the people. But Moses continues the dialogue and raises the ante:

“You told me to bring these people [to the Promised Land] ... You also said that You know me by name and that I have found favor in Your eyes. Now if I have indeed found favor in Your eyes, allow me to know Your ways, so that I will know how to [continue] to find favor in Your eyes...”⁴

⁴ Exodus 33:12-13.

This elicits the following declaration from God: “Since you have found favor in My eyes and I know you by name, I will also fulfill this request of yours.”⁵

7. Seeing God

Moses then begs, “Please show me Your face.” To which God replies: “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will reveal the Divine Name in your presence...”

God then explains:

“You cannot see My Presence, because a man cannot see me and live. [But] I have a special place where you can stand on the rocky mountain. When My Glory passes by, I will place you in a crevice in the mountain, placing My hand over you until I pass by. I will then remove My hand and you will see My back, but My face you will not see.”⁶

God then tells Moses to carve another set of tablets and commands: “Be ready in the morning to climb Mount Sinai and stand waiting for Me on the mountain peak. No man may climb up with you, and no one else may appear on the entire mountain. Even the cattle and sheep may not graze near the mountain.”

There, God reveals Himself as He promised and Moses hears proclaimed the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion:

ADONAI, ADONAI, Almighty, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth, keeper of kindness for thousands of generations, endurer of iniquity and transgression and sin, and cleanser [of those who repent].⁷

As he hears this, Moses bows down and says: “If You are indeed pleased with me, O God, please come among us ... Forgive our sins and errors and make us Your own.”

⁵ Exodus 33:17.

⁶ Exodus 33:18-23.

⁷ Exodus 34:10-14.

God then responds:

“I will make a covenant before all your people and will do miracles that have never before been brought into existence in all the universe, among any nation ... [But] be very careful... do not bow down to any other god, for God is known to demand exclusive worship.”⁸

The end of the story is that after 80 days of prayer Moses does prevail, and God grants complete pardon on Yom Kippur, which thereafter becomes the holiest day of the year.

8. Profound Intimacy

As cryptic as this conversation between Moses and God may seem, several things are clear:

Moses is not satisfied with just gaining divine pardon. Moses uses this challenge as an opportunity to uncover God’s mysterious ways. Because Moses wants to go as far as he can to experience God’s essence.

You would think that under the circumstances, with the people clearly guilty of a terrible crime, Moses would want to secure God’s forgiveness and get “out of there” as soon as possible. But no. Moses is absolutely confident in God’s love of the people, and is not satisfied with mere “damage control.” He realizes that the betrayal offers an unprecedented opportunity to access the deepest dimensions of God’s being so that human beings would forever after have an infinitely more profound relationship with God – a relationship that would never break, one that could transcend every difficulty and imbue us with hope and confidence.

Another thing that stands out about this exchange is the tone and language, which resounds with profound intimacy. If you did not know that this was a conversation between man and God, it could well read as a romantic dialogue of love.

⁸ Exodus 34:10-14

From this dialogue we can glean several more vital lessons in relationship management.

9. Never Stop Growing

Lesson Four: Never Stop Growing

Regaining trust after a betrayal is not enough. The experience must become a catalyst for deepening the relationship. Getting back to square one simply will not suffice, for that would not redeem the pain and loss.

Every challenge must lead us to a more profound love than the one we began with. We must use the opportunity to discover deeper bonds – bonds that could withstand a betrayal of trust, because they reflect a love deeper than the betrayal.

10. Never Give Up

Lesson Five: Never Give Up

True love is unconditional and eternal. When you are sure that you love your beloved and your beloved loves you, you never stop trying to repair any rift between the two.

[Obviously, this should not be confused with obsession or infatuation, which may not always reflect a healthy, unconditional love. One may need an objective voice to help determine if the love is of the healthy or unhealthy sort].

Moses knew that God is not bound by any rules that would limit His love for the people. He knew that if he was absolutely honest in his plea for forgiveness, he would prevail.

8. Build on Your Connection

Lesson Six: Build on Your Connection

When a relationship is challenged, it is critical to access the deep connection that exists between you and your beloved. Moses therefore tells God “You know me by name ... You know and recognize me like no one else does. You therefore know that I am here with my full sincerity and vulnerability, at your mercy. Please don’t forsake me.”

Knowledge of the other implies intimacy. Indeed, a form of the Hebrew word *da’at* is used throughout the Torah to imply that very thing. When you see that your beloved intimately knows you, you can ask in return: “Allow me to know you as well, so that I will know how to continue to please you.”

9. Story from the Midrash (Optional)

This lesson about connection reminds me of an inspirational story from the Midrash.

The Midrash tells a story of a man and woman who had no children after ten years of marriage. As this was long before fertility clinics and in-vitro fertilization, they decided that they should divorce. They had no quarrel with each other; each just wanted the other to have a better chance of starting a family with someone else. They came to the famed 2nd century sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, to prepare the writ of divorce. But being a truly wise man, he decided to delay them. He said, “When you were married, you had a feast. Now that you are about to divorce, you should have a feast also.”

So that is what they did. During the feast, the husband – who was feeling quite sad that this was happening – had a lot of wine to drink. Under the influence, he told his wife, “Anything of value that I own, you can take with you when you return to your parents’ home. Anything at all.” Shortly thereafter he fell asleep. While he was asleep she had their servants pick up the bed he was sleeping on and carry it together with him to her parents’ home.

In the morning he woke up. Surprised, he asked her, “Where am I?” She said, “You are in my parents’ home.” He didn’t understand. “What am I doing here?” She said, “Don’t you remember? Last night you told me that I could take anything of value. Anything at all. And that’s what I did. There is nothing more valuable to me in life than you.”

The husband realized that they could not divorce. So they went back to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai to cancel the writ of divorce. And soon thereafter the wife became pregnant.⁹

How is that for accessing a deep connection when a relationship is challenged?

10. Be Present

Lesson Seven: Be Present

A relationship is about being present. Being present doesn’t just mean showing up. It means that you are there with your complete self – invested entirely in your spouse, more than anything else you may be involved in.

At work, for instance, part of you should be present, but it’s not healthy if all of you is immersed. You must always reserve part of your essence for a higher purpose. But in a loving relationship your entire presence is necessary.

11. See the Face of Your Beloved

Lesson Eight: See the Face of Your Beloved

The fullest expression of love is when you see the “face” of your beloved. The word for face in Hebrew is *panim*, which also means “inside.” Moses, therefore, in his great longing for God, asks to see His face.

⁹ Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs 1:4.

Yet, no one can see God's face and live.

Commentaries explain that God's reply to Moses, "You will see My back but My face you will not see" should be read as follows: "You will see My back but My face *you will see by not seeing.*"¹⁰

The intimate essence of God can only be experienced or seen by not looking, by not allowing your "self" - your ego - to get in the way. The same is true for all intimate relationships. When you see your spouse as an extension of yourself, you do not truly see him or her.

Only by suspending yourself and becoming a transparent channel can you truly "see" God and your beloved.

12. Value Your Private Moments

Lesson Nine: Value Your Private Moments

Presence also includes the need, at times, for total privacy, without any distractions.

As God tells Moses: "Stand waiting for Me on the mountain peak. No man may climb up with you, and no one else may appear on the entire mountain. Even the cattle and sheep may not graze near the mountain."

At this moment you need to seclude yourself with Me in an oasis that frees you from all social and environmental forces, with no other people or even nature around.

¹⁰ Panim Yafot (lit. "Beautiful Faces"), a commentary on Chumash, based on both Halachah and Kabbalah, by Rabbi Pinchas HaLevy Horowitz of Frankfurt (c. 1730-1805), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.

13. Treasure Exclusivity

Lesson Ten: Treasure Exclusivity

Finally, a true relationship is about exclusivity. This is why God declared: "Do not bow down to any other god, for God demands exclusive worship."

This is not because of jealousy or control, but because love is all-encompassing, indivisible, and it cannot be compartmentalized. A relationship with God must embrace God on His terms, not on ours.

The Golden Calf is about worshipping a god on subjective, human terms. A god created by man in the human image, rather than God who created man in His Divine Image.

14. A Blessing

We were blessed to overhear the intimate conversation between Moses and God. We may not fully understand all its dimensions, but we can glean many lessons from their exchange.

Some of the lessons we have already mentioned. Many more remain to be explored. Lessons can also be gleaned from the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion revealed to Moses in the process. The key is to understand that the relationship between Moses and God can help us deal with all relationship issues – between you and yourself, between you and your loved ones, between you and God.

15. Image of God

Many of us have grown up with the image of a God that sits mighty in heaven, detached, angry, full of wrath, waiting to punish us for our sins. If nothing else, this week's dialogue between Moses and God dispels that myth, and teaches us that our relationship with God is far more

complex, far more subtle. It is a highly personal relationship, intimate in nature, and one that touches the very core of our being.

To quote Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev: “The God you don’t believe in I don’t believe in either.”

Perhaps our big challenge is to destroy our false gods and false images of God, and to allow ourselves to be introduced to the Real God – the one that speaks to your soul in the most intimate way. Amen.



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

Shemot > Ki Tissa > Strength in Suffering

February 18, 2011

[Note: Though this sermon is related to the theme of this week’s Torah reading, it is especially appropriate to address tragedy and suffering. And we created it in response to a number of requests for just such a sermon. May we only celebrate simchas.]

ABSTRACT

Every tragic death reminds us (or should remind us) of all other senseless losses – and unbearable pain – known or unbeknown to us. How many broken hearts are crying around the world at this very moment?

In difficult times like these, the timeless question resurfaces: Why? Why do terrible things happen to good people?

For answers and reassurance we have nowhere to turn but to the eternal strengths we glean from those that faced these issues before us – first and foremost our ancestors, whose challenges and victories are recorded in the Torah.

In this week’s Torah reading, Moses shows us the way to finding reassurance by connecting with God.

There has never been a greater need for a Higher Power in our lives – for connecting with God and gaining strength and confidence. The continuing quest to touch God, and understand His plan for creation has never been more acutely felt than when our infrastructures, institutions and global equilibrium are shaken to the core – and especially now as the upheaval in the Middle East creates instability in the entire region and the world.

In a deeply moving and fascinating dialogue, Moses probes the inner workings of God. “Show me Your face,” Moses implores, implying in so many words: “Show me how You work, show me that You are with us in our darkest moments, show me that we

can prevail over all challenges.” But God answers, “No man can see Me and live.”

Discover the lessons God’s answer contains for us in our struggles and challenges, and how we can learn to come close to God and allow Him to give us courage and fortitude in the midst of a trembling universe.

1. Bad Luck (Joke)

Old Shlomo was on his death bed and his loyal wife of 60 years was by his side. In and out of consciousness, Shlomo began to reminisce:

“Do you remember Sadie when we first got married back in Russia. We were so young and strong then ... And the Cossacks came and destroyed our village, and we had to flee? You were by my side then...

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And do you remember Sadie when we resettled in Poland, the Nazis came and started rounding up the Jews, and we had to flee again? You were by my side then...”

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And do you remember Sadie when we came to America and some anti-Semities burned down our store? You were by my side then...”

“Of course, Shlomo, where else would I be?”

“And now Sadie that I am dying from cancer, here you are again ... as always by my side ... Sadie did you ever stop to think that you are bad luck?”

2. Why Bad Things Happen to Good People

Every tragic death reminds us (or should remind us) of all other senseless losses – and unbearable pain – known or unbeknown to us. How many broken hearts are crying around the world at this very moment?

In difficult times like these, the timeless question resurfaces: Why? Why do terrible things happen to good people?

There has never been a greater need for an answer. The need for understanding God's a plan for creation has never been more acutely felt than when our infrastructures, institutions and global equilibrium are shaken to the core – and especially now as the upheaval in the Middle East creates instability in the entire region and the world.

For answers and reassurance we have nowhere to turn but to the eternal strengths we glean from those that faced these issues before us – first and foremost our ancestors, whose challenges and victories are recorded in the Torah.

And, in this week's Torah reading, Moses shows us the way to finding reassurance by connecting with God.

3. An Intimate Dialogue

In perhaps the most dramatic episode in its pages, the Torah recounts the intimate dialogue between Moses and God, as Moses implores the Almighty to forgive the Jewish people for their terrible sin of building the Golden Calf.

As Moses attempts to elicit divine compassion, he asks God "I beg you, please show me Your face."

But God rejects this request with the memorable words: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live."¹

A strange Talmudic passage explains that God rejected Moses' request because of an earlier event:

¹Exodus 33:18-20.

When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, Moses refused to look, as it says, “And Moses hid his face, for he feared to look upon God.”² So this time God said, “Now that you want to see My Face, I am not willing to show it to you. When I wanted you didn’t want; now when you want, I don’t want.”³

The Midrash further elaborates on this:

Moses erred by hiding his face. Had he not hidden his face God would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what was and what will be in the future. Finally, when Moses did request to see the divine face, God informed him that “No man can see Me and live.” [In other words,] “When I wanted, you didn’t want, and now that you want, I don’t want.”⁴

What is the meaning behind God’s bizarre tit-for-tat reaction? Somehow, it doesn’t seem God-like. After all, either Moses deserved to see the divine face or he didn’t.

Indeed, another passage in the Talmud and Midrash *lauds* Moses for averting his eyes at the burning bush, and interprets his behavior as a gesture of respect.

And we must not forget that the Torah *de facto* states: “No man can see the divine face and live.” This suggests that had Moses looked at the burning bush, he would have died.

And finally, why indeed did Moses not want to look at God’s face in the burning bush, but now he suddenly developed a burning desire to do so?

Clearly, all this requires deeper examination.

²Exodus 3:6.

³Talmud, *Berachot* 7a.

⁴Midrash, *Shemot Rabba* 3:1, 45:5.

4. A Closer Look

Let's read the burning bush story closely:

God's angel appeared to [Moses] in the heart of a fire, in the middle of a thorn-bush. As he looked, [Moses] realized that the bush was burning, but was not being consumed. Moses said to himself, "I must go over there and investigate this great phenomenon. Why doesn't the bush burn?"

When God saw that [Moses] was going to investigate, He called to him from the middle of the bush. "Moses, Moses!" And Moses replied, "Here I am." God said, "Do not come any closer. And take off the shoes from your feet. The place upon which you are standing is holy ground."

... Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at the Divine. And God said, "I have indeed seen the suffering of My people in Egypt. I have heard how they cry out because of their slave-drivers, and I am aware of their pain. I have come down to rescue them from Egypt's power. I will bring them out of that land, to a good, spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey."⁵

God's words from within the burning bush - "I have indeed seen the suffering of My people ... I have heard how they cry out" - explains why God appeared, of all places, in a burning thorn-bush. Had God appeared in, say, a flowering fruit tree, Moses might have challenged God and asked: "It's very nice that you appear in beauty, but do you also feel our human pain?! You want me to confront the depraved Pharaoh and insist that he stop the genocide and release the enslaved Jews. But everyone will ask 'Where was God in all our suffering? Does God exist only in good times but not in bad ones?'"

To pre-empt these fundamental questions, God appeared in the lowly thorn-bush in order to demonstrate that there is no place devoid of the Divine and to emphasize that He was with the Jewish people in their pain and suffering."⁶

⁵ Exodus 3:2-8.

⁶ See Rashi on the verse. From Tanchuma 14, Mechilta, Shemot Rabba 1:9. Also Torat Shlomo on the verse.

But Moses did not want to see God's face in the holocaust. He did not want to understand God's "reasoning" for allowing the death of so many innocent children. He wasn't willing to face the ultimate paradox and know divine explanations for human suffering. "He feared to look upon God" when he remembered that at that very moment lives were being consumed, even as the bush itself was not. Moses "hid his face" and just wanted to cry.

5. Times Passed, Things Changed

But then time passed and things changed. God lived up to His promise and delivered the Jews from the clutches of their Egyptian tormentors. God demonstrated that He indeed was together with the people in their suffering, and finally redeemed them through His chosen leader, Moses.

Things seemed to be going very well.

Following the Exodus, Moses led the Nation of Israel to Mount Sinai, where they experienced the greatest revelation in history – the giving of the divine mandate to the human race. But then the tide turned again. While Moses was communing with the Divine atop the mountain, the people below built the Golden Calf. This time the catastrophe did not come at the hands of the Egyptians – it was caused by the Jews themselves.

Moses was aghast to discover their betrayal. He shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments and waged war against the idolaters in the camp. But then He had to mend the broken relationship with God.

Ascending the mountain to beg God's forgiveness, Moses realized how difficult his mission was. How could he elicit God's compassion in the face of such a grave crime? How could he offer the flawed human race hope after a great fall?

High stakes indeed.

Moses knew that now he needed to return to the "burning bush," the place where joy and suffering converge – the place where the Divine

can be found in the darkest corners of existence. He understood that only this mysterious place contained the answer to this paradox.

Since his original encounter at the burning bush, Moses had matured in his relationship with God. He was now ready to see God's face. He now appreciated the need to enter into the divine mystery of human suffering. He now *wanted* to "see" the face of the Divine.

6. The Mystery of Death (Optional)

Moses' new level of awareness was made possible also by the fact that in the interim he had an encounter with God on Mount Sinai which empowered him with the ability to face death.

The Midrash⁷ explains that when God was teaching Moses the methods of purification from all forms of defilement, Moses asked in shock: "How can anyone ever be purified from the impurity of death?"

Moses was shocked because death is the one event we constantly confront which challenges the entire premise of our significance. It is final. This is why Moses did not attempt to analyze the issue intellectually; he took it personally to heart and cried out: "What can possibly purify the impurity of death?! How can we ever heal from it, how can it not shake the very core of our beliefs?"

In response, God shared with Moses the mystery of cycles. Everything in existence is part of a cycle – a part of one continuum of energy. And every form of energy requires movement. Energy cannot be generated in a vacuum; it needs two opposite poles that cause tension and then resolution.

Take the life force energy within our bodies. Our heartbeat is the result of two movements – contraction and expansion. So is our breath – inhaling and exhaling. Tension and then resolution, leading to another new cycle, and then another.

⁷Midrash, Bamidbar Rabba 19:4.

This mystery is captured in the balance of mixing water and ashes (the aftermath of fire) in the mitzvah of the red heifer. Fire is the tension and water the resolution. Together they are the source of life itself.

7. Healing from Spiritual Death

Realizing that all answers lie with God and recognizing the need to heal from the “spiritual death” brought upon by the Golden Calf, Moses implored God for understanding, for clarity: “I beg you, show me Your face.”⁸

And here God revealed to Moses one of the most profound secrets of all: “I show My face not in beauty and pleasure, but in the burning bush – in pain and suffering. I show My face not when you want to see it, but when I want you to see it.”

When God said this He was not “getting even” with Moses or playing tit-for-tat. He was exposing His essence and telling Moses: “I want a partner. I cannot show you My face if you do not partner with Me. Had you looked at Me when I wanted to show you My face, even though it was in pain, then you would have joined Me in the mysterious journey of grief and joy, and you would be able to see My face and gather strength. You cannot come and expect to see My face on your terms – when you want. You have to respect the moment when I want to show it to you.”

8. Secrets of God’s Personality

But the story doesn’t end here. After all is said and done, God did indeed reveal to Moses the secrets of His inner personality and the hidden Thirteen Attributes of Divine Compassion:

⁸ As the Talmud, Berachot 7a explains that Moses was plagued by the timeless question why the good suffer and the wicked prosper.

“I will make all My Glory pass before you, and I will reveal the Divine Name in your presence ... [Though] you cannot see my face, because no man can see me and live, [but] I have a special place where you can stand on the rocky mountain. When My Glory passes by, I will place you in a crevice in the mountain, placing My hand over you until I pass by. I will then remove My hand and you will see My back, but My face you will not see.”⁹

Moreover, commentaries explain that God finally showed Moses His face as well. Panim Yafot¹⁰ reads the verse like this: “You will see My back but My face [will be revealed to you only when] you will not see.” In other words, “You will see my face only by not looking.”

9. The Lesson for Us

What does it all mean to us?

I suggest that when we face unfathomable suffering, we are not expected to be better than Moses. We, too, can close our eyes and just weep.

Maybe God can witness so much pain and be able to take it. But we are human. We don't want to look at God's face in such moments. It's too terrifying.

Yet, whether we like it or not, God wants us to partner with Him. We may resist the partnership. From time to time, perhaps more often than not, we may cry out in our own vulnerable moments that we just want some peace and quiet. And I think God understands and forgives.

⁹ Exodus 33:19-23.

¹⁰ Panim Yafot: (lit. “Beautiful Faces”) is a commentary on Chumash, based on both Halachah and Kabbalah, by Rabbi Pinchas HaLevy Horowitz of Frankfurt (c. 1730-1805), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.

But as partners we have a right to ask – especially whenever we are touched by the mystery of tragedy – “How many more bushes have to be burned before the Divine Presence is finally revealed?”

We have a right to ask. And we have a right to pray. But we also have the responsibility to work to make this world a better place – a place where the Divine can call home. It is then that the Divine Presence will rest among us in all its glory, and we will, at last, understand the need for the suffering and how it brought us to good – to the best possible place, to the Final Redemption. Amen.