



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayishlach

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December 17, 2016

Vayishlach

**A Face to Face Conversation**



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

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## ABSTRACT

What personal lessons can we learn from emojis, Facebook and other modern tech stuff?

Many things. And they are contained in a surprising place, where most of us would perhaps not look: A verse in this week’s Torah portion.

An emoji is an animated face that conveys an emotion, thought, or expression in a few tiny pixels. It achieves this by distilling one human characteristic – joy, sadness, laughter, love – into an easily-identifiable image.

Faces are like that. They capture something essential in their complexion. This may be the two-billion-faces-strong power of Facebook, a book of faces that captures and shares people’s essence across the World Wide Web. But technology can also belie that essence, as when the face has been photo-shopped to conceal its owner’s true nature.

Now you may be asking, “What does all of this have to do with Judaism and G-d?”

The answer is: everything. And it can be found in this week’s Torah reading, where we learn how Jacob named the place where he wrestled with the angel, where he came face-to-face with the Divine, *Pniel*, and why it was later called *Pnuel*.

Discover the radical difference between the word “face” in English and the word for face in Hebrew – *panim*. A discussion of the above is augmented by a reflective story told by Rabbi Meir of Premishlan about a horse who thought that its face reflected in the water was another horse. It is a story that teaches us something profound about our animal nature and our divine nature that transcends it.

## EMOJIS, FACEBOOK, AND TORAH: LEARN TO MAKE FACES

### 1. The Mirror (Joke)

Miss Paddington is in Paris and is visiting "Louvre", the famous French museum.

She looks at the paintings and suddenly she says, "Is this a dreadful painting or what! I can't believe that a respectable place like this could have such a horrible piece of art in its collection."

"Pardon, Madame!" one of the staff says, "But it's not a painting, it's a mirror."

### 2. Talmudic Logic (Longer Joke)

A young man in his mid-twenties knocks on the door of the noted scholar, Rabbi Schwartz. "My name is Sean Goldstein," he says. "I've come to you because I wish to study Talmud."

"Do you know Aramaic?" the rabbi asks.

"No," replies the young man.

"Hebrew?" asks the rabbi.

"No," replies the young man again.

"Have you studied Torah?" asks the Rabbi, growing a bit irritated.

"No, Rabbi. But don't worry. I graduated from Berkeley summa cum laude with a degree in philosophy, and just finished my doctoral dissertation at Harvard on Socratic logic. So now, I would just like to round out my education with a little study of the Talmud."

"I seriously doubt," the rabbi says, "that you are ready to study Talmud. It is the deepest book of our people. If you wish, however, I am willing to examine you in logic, and if you pass that test I will teach you Talmud."

The young man agrees.

Rabbi Schwartz holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

The young man stares at the rabbi. "Is that the test in logic?"

The rabbi nods.

"The one with the dirty face washes his face," he answers wearily.

"Wrong. The one with the clean face washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face."

"Very clever," Goldstein says. "Give me another test."

The rabbi again holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"We have already established that. The one with the clean face washes his face."

"Wrong. Each one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. So the one with the clean face washes his face. When the one with the dirty face sees the one with the clean face wash his face, he also washes his face. So each one washes his face."

"I didn't think of that," says Goldstein. It's shocking to me that I could make an error in logic. Test me again."

The rabbi holds up two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"Each one washes his face."

"Wrong. Neither one washes his face. Examine the simple logic. The one with the dirty face looks at the one with the clean face and thinks his face is clean. The one with the clean face looks at the one with the dirty face and thinks his face is dirty. But when the one with the clean face sees the one with the dirty face doesn't wash his face, he also doesn't wash his face. So neither one washes his face."

Goldstein is desperate. "I am qualified to study Talmud. Please give me one more test."

He groans, though, when the rabbi lifts two fingers. "Two men come down a chimney. One comes out with a clean face, the other comes out with a dirty face. Which one washes his face?"

"Neither one washes his face."

"Wrong. Do you now see, Sean, why Socratic logic is an insufficient basis for studying Talmud? Tell me, how is it possible for two men to come down the same chimney, and for one to come out with a clean face and the other with a dirty face? Don't you see? The whole question is '*narishkeit*', foolishness, and if you spend your whole life trying to answer foolish questions, all your answers will be foolish, too."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jewish Humor by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, p. 47-48.

### 3. Emojis and Facebook

Faces are fascinating. On one hand, every face has the same general characteristics – mouth, eyes, nose, cheeks, chin, forehead... On the other hand, no two faces are alike,<sup>2</sup> we all have distinctive facial qualities that differentiate us as individuals; we are all affected differently by our climb down the chimney: some of us dirty ourselves, some of us remain clean, some of us measure our own faces against the mirror of another's.

Back in the day, when people said, "Let's have a face to face conversation," they meant let's sit down and talk while facing each other in person. Your face, my face, together in a room.

Today, face-to-face experiences can take on many forms. There is Skype, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts. Moreover, people's social interaction – the epitome of face-to-face living – is migrating more and more to social media, where faces, as captured in Instagram, emojis, selfies, live video feeds, and photos posts, play a unique role.

This is epitomized by the very name of the world's largest and dominant social media platform, Facebook.

Facebook is called Facebook because it is, quite literally, a book of faces, facial recognition driving its social network, pictures and videos.

Wikipedia explains where the name comes from:

A face book or facebook is a printed or web directory found at American universities consisting of individuals' photographs and names. In particular, it denotes publications of this type distributed by university administrations at the start of the academic year with the intention of helping students get to know each other.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Zuckerberg monetized this idea, by creating a global Facebook, a world wide web of faces, profiles, people, and online interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 38a.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face\\_book](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_book).

On one hand, faces online are more and more unique, facial recognition software capturing the unique details of people's faces, storing them in databases, and creating algorithms to recognize faces automatically. Facebook, and similar websites, use facial recognition software to flag illegal or illicit materials and faces online, such as terrorist's faces or inappropriate postings. Security cameras and border patrol do the same. Facebook also uses it for positive purposes, to suggest tags for faces in photos and to recommend people you may know.

This is possible because, like a fingerprint, every single face has unique properties and characteristics that make it stand out from other faces.

However, on the other hand, faces today are also easily manipulated. People stage selfies that best capture the right angle, light, and pose so as to present their best face to the public. You see faces online and then you meet the individual in person and it's like two different realities. This is because technology, while capturing facial uniqueness, also allows us to manipulate our (and other) faces to minimize our perceived weakest features, maximize our most beautiful parts, and present our best face.

The emoji phenomenon captures this well. By honing into and magnifying a single feature, an animated face can capture the essence of an expression or emotion – utter joy, sadness, love – in a few tiny pixels.

This definition of Facebook – literally a book of faces – and the dichotomous faces present lead us into an interesting discussion based on this week's Torah reading.

#### 4. Parshat Vayishlach

In this week's portion – *Parshat Vayishlach* – we read how Jacob wrestled with the angel, and having prevailed how he named the place where the battle occurred:

*Jacob named the place Pniel [saying,] “I have seen the Divine face to face,<sup>4</sup> and my soul has withstood it.” And the sun shone upon him as he left Pnuel ...<sup>5</sup>*

One of the most fascinating aspects of Torah – one of the infinite number of fascinating things about Torah – is how a profound life lesson relevant to today’s living is innocently embedded in a seemingly straightforward verse. The verse seems, at first glance, to be conveying a fact – Jacob naming a place – but, in reality, the verse conveys a soul lesson of cosmic magnitude.

If you listened carefully when I read the verse, you noticed a change in the name of the place. First the Torah stated that Jacob named the place *Pniel*, then the Torah stated that Jacob left *Pnuel*. Why the change of name, from *Pniel* to *Pnuel*?<sup>6</sup>

The commentaries on the verse interpret this change of spelling in various ways. Let us here present one idea that will hopefully inform our lives today, inspiring us to come face-to-face with a resonating truth.

## 5. Pniel vs. Pnuel

*Pniel* translates as *pni* – “face of,” or “my face,” and *E-l* translates as G-d. *Pnuel* translates as *panu* – “space” or “vacancy,” and of course *E-l* translates as G-d.<sup>7</sup>

The words *pni* and *panu* seem to contradict each other. *Pni* is referring to “my face,” my *pnimiyut*, my innermost face-to-face interaction with divine reality (as the verse itself explains, “I have seen the Divine face to face”), while *panu* seems to suggest an outer experience, creating space for otherness.

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<sup>4</sup> The face of the angel.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 32:31-32.

<sup>6</sup> For the following, see Likkutei Sichot vol. 35, pp. 137-142 and sources cited there at length.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Rashi to Leviticus 26:9, 17.



This intensifies our question: Why, when naming the place, does Jacob call it *Pniel* – explaining that there “my face,” my *pnimiyut*, my innermost being came face-to-face with the innermost essence of G-d – and in the next verse the Torah calls the place *Pnuel*, seeming to draw attention to an empty space between Jacob and G-d?

In the answer to this dichotomy lies an eternal and essential truth. *Pniel* and *Pnuel* are one place articulating two integral aspects of the same place. Indeed, *Pniel* and *Pnuel* are two necessary steps in connecting with serving E-l, G-d our Creator.

One may think that we live in a duality, where our outer, material lives are somewhat separated from our more intimate experiences.

Take the word “face” in English: The “face” of something means the surface level. On the face of it. Face denotes the outer dimension, not necessarily what lies beneath and within. We can show someone a smiling face though we are crying inside. And vice versa. A face can be deceptive and even duplicitous. We can photoshop and make any face look as we want it to look. Hence, the cliché: Never judge a book by its cover. (This cliché, by the way, is simply untrue. Everyone judges books by their covers. That’s why book cover design is a multi-million dollar business, as is all packaging).

Now contrast that with the word for face in Hebrew – *panim*: *Panim* means both “face” and “inside” (*pnimiyut*). Hebrew is the original language and Hebrew names capture and reflect the essence of the objects (or people) called by their respective name. In Judaism, in Torah, a true face is seamless flow between your inside and your outside (*tocho k’baro*). What you see is what you get. A smile reflects joy from within. A cry manifests a sincere feeling from within.

## 6. Seamlessness:

Jacob was teaching us that there is no duality: Both our inner (*Pniel*) and outer (*Pnuel*) are one and the same. Our inner relationship with the divine is fully integrated with our outer experiences.

Jacob is teaching us that our relationship with G-d begins with *Pniel*, with our innermost essence (our face) connecting with G-d's innermost essence.<sup>8</sup>

Then, and only then, *the sun shone on him as he left Pnuel*, the space where their encounter took place.

But the verse continues, *he was limping because of his thigh*, which had been damaged in the encounter.

When first you connect with the innermost part of the Divine face, then no matter where you go, and no matter how much space you create between you and G-d – even when you are limping along, even in moments of weakness – still the sun shines and reflects that innermost quality to the whole world. And even the parts and spaces within you that seem vacant of the Divine are only empty vessels waiting to receive the innermost face of G-d.

## 7. Reflections (Story)

A disciple of Rabbi Meir of Premishlan once complained to him about a man who had started a competing business. “He is depriving me of my livelihood!” cried the Chassid. “You must tell him to close his shop!”

Said Rabbi Meir: “Have you ever noticed how a horse behaves when he is led to a water hole? He begins to paw angrily at the water with his hooves; only when the water is well-muddied does he begin to drink. Why does the horse act this way?”

“I don’t know,” said the Chassid. “Why?”

“Because the horse sees a reflection of his face and thinks that another horse has come to drink his water. So he kicks and paws until he has “chased away” the other horse. What the horse doesn’t understand,” concluded Rabbi Meir, “is that G-d has created enough water for all the horses.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Ohr HaTorah, Vayishlach, p. 240bff.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.meaningfullife.com/competition/>

## 8. Practically Speaking

When looking at another's face, we can see the *panu*, the space of differences between us, and we might even believe that another has come to steal our livelihood and sustenance. This is like the horse thinking another horse is coming to steal his water.

Or we can see another's face like *pni*, "my face," realizing that another face is but a reflection of "my face," and that the Creator thus provides enough for all. And that truly, there is no competition, only completion and companionship.

Life is a chimney. We climb down the chimney and we often get dirty. Each one of our faces is affected (or not affected) differently.

But, at the core, we all share a face, an essence. The space and openness we create is different. Still the inner core, the *penimiyut*, is the same.

The same is true when it comes to our relationship with G-d. When we connect with the *pni E-l*, with the inner divine levels, then even the *panu*, our outer lives, is one and innermost.

This is the unique message of Judaism: We don't need to live compartmentalized lives – separating between the spiritual and the material. We don't live ascetic lives, nor do we succumb to materialism. Because G-d created both, and we relieve the tension between spirit and matter by spiritualizing the material – by doing a mitzvah with a physical object, by giving monetary charity, by making a blessing on food and drink.

We don't experience the divine only on holy days, like Shabbat, Yom Kippur and holidays. We experience it every day, every second of our lives. The difference is only in the way we manifest the experience. But *Hashem Echad* – one divine reality connects everything. Our outer lives are one with our inner ones.

May we all be blessed with the Priel and Pnuel integration – a seamless life, filled with harmony and peace, both within our own different voices, and within our families and communities.

And this peace will spill over and have a ripple effect in bringing peace to the entire world. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom!