

Parshas Beha'alo-secha u-Semunas Hashem Yabit

RABBI PINCHAS GELB



My son Eitan asked an interesting question. The verse at the end of *Parshas Beha'alo-secha* states about Moshe Rabbenu (*Bamidbar* 12:8):

פה אל פה אדבר בו ומראה ולא בחידת ותמנת ה' יביט.

Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles, and upon the image of Hashem he will gaze [yabit].

Commenting on the verse in the Bris Bein HaBesarim which states (*Bereishis* 15:5): “*Habeit na hashamayma u-sfor hakochavim im tuchal lispor osam*,” “Gaze, please, toward the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them,” Rashi says that, as a general matter, the term “*habata*” means to gaze downward toward something. So what does it mean that the verse in *Beha'alo-secha* selects the word “*yabit*” as the form of the verb “to gaze” with reference to seeing the “image of Hashem,” when nothing is higher than Hashem?

This is a good question based on Rashi’s comment to *Bereishis* 15:5. One answer could be as follows.

The “*Temunas Hashem*” That Moshe Rabbeinu Saw

The *gemara* in *Berachos* (7a) quotes the opinion of Rabi Yonasan that Moshe Rabbenu was rewarded for not gazing directly at the *sneh* by later being able to see “the image of Hashem.” When Moshe first saw the *sneh* and heard the call of Hashem, the verse states (*Shemos* 3:6): “Moshe hid his face, for he was afraid to gaze [*mei-habit*] upon God.” The *gemara* explains that Moshe’s reward for this is specified at the end of *Parshas Beha'alo-secha* which states (*Bamidbar* 12:8): “Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles, and upon the image of Hashem he will gaze [*yabit*].” Thus, the *gemara* juxtaposes the use of the word “*habata*” in these verses to conclude

Rabbi Pinchas Gelb is a lawyer in Los Angeles.
He has been a member of Adas Torah since 2005.

that the statement “upon the image of Hashem he will gaze” was Moshe’s reward for having averted his gaze when he encountered the presence of Hashem at the *sneh*.¹

The Rambam, in *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:5, explains this *gemara* to mean that Moshe Rabbenu was rewarded for not jumping to quick conclusions about Hashem. As the Rambam states, when investigating difficult matters such as knowledge of Hashem, a person “should not make categorical affirmations in favor of the first opinion that occurs to him and should not, from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of God; he should rather feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself.” The Rambam continues:

It is in this sense that it is said (Shemos 3:6): “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to gaze [mei-habit] upon God,” this being an additional meaning of the verse over and above its external meaning that indicates that he hid his face because of his being afraid to look upon the light manifesting itself – and not that God, who is greatly exalted above every deficiency, can be apprehended by the eyes. Moses, peace be on him, was commended for this; and God, may He be exalted, let overflow upon him so much of His bounty and goodness that it became necessary to say of him (Bamidbar 12:8): “And upon the image of Hashem he will gaze [yabit].” The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have stated (Ber. 7a) that this is a reward for his having at first hidden his face so as not look upon God.

Thus, the Rambam emphasizes that, when the *gemara* states that Moshe’s reward for not directly looking at the *sneh* was his later ability to see the image of Hashem, it means that, while one cannot quickly or easily formulate an understanding of Hashem, over time and with sustained reflection, Moshe Rabbenu reached an inner cognizance of Hashem. This is what the verse means when it says “*u-semunas Hashem yabit*,” “and upon the image of Hashem he will gaze.”

In the *Shemoneh Perakim*, the Rambam further explains that, although Moshe’s understanding of Hashem was necessarily imperfect, he was able to inscribe in his mind a firm and fixed vision of Hashem. At the end of the seventh chapter of the *Shemoneh Perakim*, the Rambam says that Moshe’s understanding of Hashem to the extent of “*re’iyas panim*” would be like someone who sees the face of a friend directly. Seeing the “face” would mean that the attributes of Hashem would be completely remembered and exactly delineated:

¹ Interestingly, among his final statements toward the end of his life, as part of the *bracha* to *Shevet Yosef*, Moshe Rabbenu refers to Hashem—not as the “*motzi Mitzrayim*” and not as the “*nosen ha-Torah*”—but, rather, as the “*shochni sneh*” (Deut. 33:16). His first encounter with Hashem always resonated with him and never abated.

אז בנפשו חקוקה צורתו עד שלא יתערב לו עם זולתו אפילו בשעה שאינו רואה אותו
*Then the image of his friend is inscribed and perfectly delineated in his soul
 even when he cannot see him.*

But there is another level of recognition that is tantamount to seeing this friend from the back, “*k’sheyirah achorav*.” Then, there is cognizance of the friend’s features and attributes, but in a manner that can be somewhat uncertain and not precisely differentiated, “*pa’amim yaspik alav veyisarev lo im zulaso*.”

The Rambam says the same applies with regard to one’s inner understanding of Hashem. The aspiration, although unachievable, is to know the attributes of Hashem—which are *sui generis*—in a manner that is completely differentiated from everything else, without recourse to metaphor or analogy. This is:

ידיעת השם יתברך מאמתת מציאותו מה שלא ישתתף במציאות ההיא זולתו מן
 הנמצאות עד שימצא בנפשו מציאותו חזקה ונבדלת על מה שמצא בנפשו מציאות
 שאר הנמצאות.

*Knowledge of Hashem that is firmly inscribed in a person’s consciousness
 and also completely differentiated from everything else that he knows and
 of which he is aware.*

This perfect knowledge of the Infinite is impossible to arrive at, and even Moshe Rabbenu could not ascertain this direct knowledge. But Moshe reached a level just beneath this perfect awareness. According to the Rambam, this is the implication of the verse in *Parshas Ki Sisa* when Hashem tells Moshe that he cannot see His face but that he could see His back:

והוא אשר כנה ואמר (שמות לג, כג): “וראית את אחרי.”
*This is what the verse euphemistically states (Shemos 33:23): “and you
 will see My back.”²*

The notion described by the *gemara* in *Berachos* 7(a), according to the Rambam, is that a person can aspire toward a state in which he or she has developed a fixed inner awareness of Hashem that is completely differentiated from anything else in the world. Through deliberation, this understanding can be developed.³ And while

2 Rashi on *Bamidbar* 12:8, citing the statement in *Sifrei* 103, likewise identifies the “image of Hashem” referenced at the end of *Parshas Beha’alosecha* with the statement in *Parshas Ki Sisa* “*ve-ra’isa es achorai*.” Rashi, there, explains this to mean that Hashem showed Moshe the “*tefillin* knot” that is placed behind the head.

3 The *Malbim* expresses this in his comment to *Yeshayahu* 30:10. He states that “*im yetzayer benafsho temuna dimyonis oh tziur sichli*, if a person draws an inner image,” and, thereupon, “*ba el mechze Elokim tamid*, he can always arrive at a vision of God.” Nevertheless, it is a “*gvul b’inyanim habilti mugbalim*,” it is the paradoxical process whereby one attempts to “delineate that which cannot actually be delineated.”

unreachable to a complete degree, Moshe Rabbeinu achieved it to an appreciable extent. (See also *Hil. Yesodei HaTorah* 1:10 and 7:6.)

In this sense, the term “*habata*” references, not only gazing down physically upon something, but also gazing within—peering at the impressed substance of one’s own memory and the accurate formulations of objective reality that are contained within the possession of one’s own mind. The Rambam expresses this formulation in *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:4 with regard to the Torah’s various words for “sight” which, according to the Rambam, can convey physical looking as well as mental cognizance. And the *Malbim*, in his comment to *Bamidbar* 12:8, specifically defines the word “*habata*” (as opposed to the word “*re’iya*”) to mean inner sight:

כבר בארתי (בפ' יתרו בפסוק לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה) שתמונה היא צורה השוקעת, ובא על הצורה השוקעת בנפש הנביא בעת החזון שאינה צורה בולטת ממשית רק צורה שוקעת בכח דמיונו ועז"א ותמונה לנגד עיני ויש הבדל בין ראייה להבטה, שהראיה מציין ראות העין, ועז"א כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה, וההבטה מציין עיון השכל.

I have previously explained (in Parshas Yisro on the verse “do not make for yourself a pesel or any temuna”) that a temuna is an engraved image, and it happens upon the engraved image in the soul of the prophet during a time of vision that is not a three-dimensional image but rather is an engraved image in the capacity of the mind; and regarding this it is stated “and a picture before my eyes.” And there is a difference between [the terms] re’iya and habata because re’iya means physical sight, and regarding this it is stated “that you shall not see any picture,” and habata means investigation of the mind.

So when Rashi in *Bereishis* states that the connotation of the word “*habata*” is to look downward, and we asked how could one look downward on Hashem, the answer becomes clear when we recognize that “*habata*” in this case means looking inward. Moshe’s understanding of Hashem was contained within his inner life. Indeed, this phrase in the verse does not state that Moshe was looking at Hashem—rather, even when he was not in an active state of prophesy, Moshe would constantly look at the “*temunas Hashem*,” the sustained impression of Hashem, that he remembered and had internalized within the contours of his consciousness. The verse’s use of the term “*habata*” with regard to this “*temunas Hashem*” is very precise because the “image of Hashem” that the verse states Moshe would see was coherently impressed upon and remembered within his inner life.

Humility as the Indispensable Quality

Yet, this raises another question which is how the language of “*habata*” can apply even to an inner understanding of Hashem to the extent that the verse states about Moshe that “upon the image of Hashem he will gaze.” The prophets were able to ascertain, albeit indirectly, something accurate—with inner definition and resolution—about Hashem. But the question arises what distinctive inner quality enables the human mind to internalize and sustain with coherence any true image about Hashem. The answer to this might be found in the Torah’s description of Moshe a few verses earlier:

והאיש משה ענו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה.

Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth. (Bamidbar 12:3)

The image of Hashem in the consciousness of an arrogant person is not of the Living God because, as soon as a person feels as if he or she “possesses” this image, it ceases to be an honest reflection of the Divine. The coherent image of Hashem can subsist within an individual’s consciousness only if the person stands in relation to this image with aspiration and outer directedness, with no sense of self-congratulation or self-focus. Humility is the indispensable quality of religious consciousness. A person can comprehend and maintain an authentic vision of Hashem only if he or she is exceedingly humble.

The *Sefer Yerei'im* (232) quotes Rav Yehudai Gaon who concludes that there is an affirmative obligation to cultivate humility, and he cites the verse praising Moshe Rabbenu’s humility as his source. The *Semag*, who also references this verse, famously records at the end of negative precept number 64 that, after completing his work, he had a dream during which he realized that he has to include the prohibition against haughtiness in his count of the 613 *mitzvos*. Significantly, he bases this prohibition against haughtiness on the precepts in *Devarim* 8:11-14 to be diligent not to forget Hashem.⁴

Moshe Rabbenu was uniquely able to develop and maintain an honest image of Hashem in his consciousness because he did so without any self-aggrandizement whatsoever. Accordingly, the verse uses the term “*habata*” to attest to the fact that Moshe could maintain a true image of Hashem—the vital and vibrant “*temunas Hashem*”—within the context of his inner life, but also directly connects this with the accompanying verse which states that Moshe was exceedingly humble. Moshe’s

⁴ See Rav Mayer Twersky, “The Heresy of Hubris” (TorahWeb.org, 2004).

ability to cultivate and maintain a correct inner image of Hashem was contingent upon his inner sense of humility.

This connection between *Bamidbar* 12:3 (regarding Moshe's humility) and *Bamidbar* 12:8 (regarding Moshe's ability to see the image of Hashem), and Rashi's statement that the verse "*u-semunas Hashem yabit*" references the knot of tefillin that Hashem had shown Moshe, is beautifully alluded to in *Anim Zemiros*:

קשר תפלין הראה לענו ותמונת ה' לנגד עיניו.

The knot of [His] tefillin He showed to the humble one, and the image of Hashem was right before his eyes.

Image of Shivisi Hashem Lenegdi Samid

The capacity to formulate a coherent inner image about Hashem is not only a high aspiration but also a daily obligation. Moreover, it is not only incumbent upon the prophets but, through diligent reflection and careful learning, it is a duty of all observant Jews.

The Rema writes among his opening statements on the Shulchan Aruch:

שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד הוא כלל גדול בתורה ובמעלות הצדיקים אשר הולכים לפני האלקים.

'I place Hashem before me always' (Tehillim 16:8) is a main principle in the Torah, and [it is] among the remarkable traits of the righteous ones who walk before Hashem.

The *Mishna Berura* specifies how this is applied:

דהיינו שיצייר בנפשו תמיד איך שהוא עומד לפני הש"י כי הקב"ה מלא כל הארץ כבודו.

This means that he should constantly inscribe in his consciousness how he stands before Hashem Yisborach, because Hashem's glory fills the entire world.

The Rema continues that the way a person conducts himself or herself at home is different than while standing before a king or a respected dignitary. This typically is understood to mean that a person's actions are different in the presence of a great individual. But the truth of the matter is that a person's entire consciousness is elevated during such times, and, when a person maintains awareness of constantly standing before Hashem, then the individual not only guards his or her actions but also elevates his or her mind.

Indeed, the awareness of standing before Hashem, and fixing this awareness within individual consciousness, is the integrating theme of religious daily life. As Rav Yitzchak Twersky zt"l says in his conclusion to his article about the Code of Jewish Law:

As a personal postscript, or “concluding unscientific postscript,” I would like to suggest that, if the Psalmist’s awareness of “I have set God before me continually” (Tehillim 16:8)—the motto of the Shulhan ‘Aruk—is one of the standards of saintliness, then all “Shulhan ‘Aruk Jews,” all who abide by its regulations while penetrating to its essence and its real motive powers, should be men who strive for saintliness. But strive they must, zealously, imaginatively, and with unrelenting commitment.⁵

As a result, a central characteristic of religious pursuit is to care far more about the impressions cultivated within one’s own mind, and the Divine mind, than about an impression that one makes upon the minds of others. Inscribing the inner image of standing before Hashem is a hallmark of religious consciousness and a central aspiration of daily religious life. Even though to a lesser degree, the same way Moshe Rabbenu was able to cultivate and maintain a genuine image of Hashem within his consciousness and to see it (*yabit*), each individual has to endeavor to achieve awareness of “I have set Hashem before me continually.”

⁵ Rav Yitzchak Twersky, “*The Shulhan ‘Aruk: Enduring Code of Jewish Law*,” Judaism XVI (1967), 141-158.

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Adas Torah

9040 West Pico Boulevard

Los Angeles, CA 90035

www.adastorah.org

adastorah@earthlink.net

(310) 228-0963

Rabbi Dovid Revah, *Rav and Mara D'Asra*

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