

The Limitations God Shares with Us

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How much does God share with human beings? It takes only a half-moment of thought to realize that our traditions, both biblical and post-biblical, are filled with anthropomorphic images of God's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. God is disappointed at the way in which creation turned out and decides to wipe it all out and start again. God gets a whiff of the delicious aroma of Noah's sacrifice after the flood and decides that human beings aren't so bad after all. God is jealous of other deities. God worries about the Divine reputation if the Israelites, for all their rebellion, are not brought into the Land of Canaan. God expresses joy at being able to bless and reward human beings, who are God's children. And God even suffers along with those children, as the following will illustrate: the Ten Commandments appear in Parashat Yitro (Exod. 20), and the Yerushalmi (Talmud of the Land of Israel) in Tractate Sukkah (4:3) records a bold re-reading of a crucial word in that famous section's very first verse. "*Asher hotzeitikha me-eret mitzrayim*"—who took you out of the land of Egypt—is revocalized so as to read "*asher hutzeitikha*"—that is, who was taken out of the land of Egypt with you. God, in this reading, also went into exile, and thus was also in need of rescue.

But how do you reconcile the idea of God's transcendent power with such things as a failure to anticipate human flaws, or a weakness for the smell of roasting meat, or jealousy, or suffering the travails of exile? Texts such as these raise eyebrows because they seem to lower God in our estimation.

One can, however, look at these passages from a diametrically opposed vantage point. Why do we find these descriptions of God moving? Because when God behaves as we do, we don't have to see it as a lowering of *God* in our estimation; instead, it can be seen as *raising* the esteem of

our own human emotions and vulnerabilities. We share joy and suffering with God, and this elevates our human experience to the level of a Divine quality. And it can provide us with a measure of comfort and reassurance.

So as we approach the annual reading of Parashat Yitro, let's focus on one particular matter in which the Divine may have human-like limitations. It is connected to the Torah's oft-repeated image when God is said to be present, which is the image of the cloud. At the center of Yitro, Sinai having been reached, God says to Moses "*hineh anokhi ba eilekha be-av he-anan*"—I shall come to you in a thick cloud (Exod. 19:9).

Zev Wolf of Zhitomir, an important early Hasidic teacher and a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, understood this ubiquitous image of God as a cloud in a very audacious and poignant way. In one of his teachings in the collection known as *Or Ha-Me'ir* (it is the first of his homilies for the festival of Shavuot), he begins with an insight into how we often fail to communicate the truth about *ourselves* (the translation that follows is in part from Arthur Green):

Sometimes a marvelous piece of wisdom falls into an intelligent person's mind, something that contains a real insight. But when you try to share that thought with another person, you are unable to reveal the wisdom that lies buried deep within your own heart. It would just be too subtle for them to understand. You therefore end up dressing it up with some sort of story that somewhat obscures the true thoughts. We then end up paying attention to what has been *said*, and are too unaware to pay attention to the wonderful inner truth or feeling that the words are trying to express.

Have we not all experienced this? A deep intuition that we just didn't know how to convey to someone else? Or, much more poignantly, consider this: a deep feeling of love and connection that somehow can't be conveyed in the true form in which it resides within us. Or got so clumsily expressed that it was poorly understood or misapprehended. It results in an imperfect understanding of what's in our heart, or even worse, a *misunderstanding*. Novels and operas thrive on this phenomenon, but one needn't go to the theater or read great literature to encounter it.

And conversely, haven't we all sensed the occasional impenetrability of the inner thoughts and feelings of *another* person? That there was something more there than we were being shown? Sometimes this difficulty in communicating the deep thoughts and feelings is of little consequence. At other times, though, it can slow down the creation of bonds between two people. And in its most extreme form, it can create the most frustrating and tragic barriers to those bonds.

But now comes Zev Wolf's remarkable assertion: "Our holy Torah has the same difficulty."

The Torah cannot be guaranteed to be expressing the full depth of the *Divine* wisdom and the *Divine* love and empathy. Divine love is greater and more subtle than what can be expressed directly in words. And so, we may find that the Torah is hard to understand, or seems harsh, or overly concerned with details that do not speak to us. And Zev Wolf is telling us that we should recognize that God's love for us is purer and truer than anything the words and the narratives can convey.

And now, Zev Wolf connects it to the verse I referred to earlier: "I (*Anokhi*) shall come to you in a thick cloud." The whole Torah, which is intended to be the unfolding of the *Anokhi*, the "I" that is God's essence, will come to you wrapped in a cloud and with reduced intensity. Because even God cannot put all the deep hopes and dreams for the world and for God's children into perfect words. And thus, when we listen to this clothed message, we may not hear all that is intended and all that is truly there.

What theological derring-do this is! Another way to put this is that God shares with us the limitation of putting the full depth of inner feelings and thoughts into words. Just as we are condemned often to be misunderstood, so does God have just that same trouble. The Torah cannot be a perfect mirror of God's core; but if and when it disappoints us, we should remember with empathy (for God!) that there is yet greater good and grace in creation, and in the Creator, than any Scripture can convey simply. And we owe the Holy One that empathy.

Why did Zev Wolf offer to his Hasidim this extraordinary lesson about God and the Torah? So that they—and we—would be able to feel comforted in our *own* inabilities always to express faithfully what is truly in our hearts. For those inabilities, it turns out, are *shared* with God. And a kind and generous understanding of this universal impediment can overcome the barriers that this shared disability creates, whether between human beings or between humans and their Creator.