

Jews are typically not that theologically oriented and often feel uncomfortable talking about God. The word theology itself is Greek, and there is no Hebrew word that is exactly analogous. God is mentioned in many places in the Talmud, but, as long as the Talmud is, and it is long, in standard print is over 6,200 pages , there is no tractate God or chapter called theology.

But there is one thing that Jewish people tend to know- and that is that you can't see God. Even those who don't know much Bible, tend to remember Moses' request to see God and how he was told, "a human cannot see God and live".

Yet in this week's Torah portion there are two references to seeing God's face.

What's going on?

The portion begins with the most famous wrestling match in history- Jacob v the unknown challenger. The Torah tells us he was alone all night, and yet he wrestled until dawn. Was it with an angel, he wrestled, or perhaps with his guilt, his conscience after cheating his brother and lying to his father? There are many possible explanations.

At the end though, as dawn approaches, it says: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, for I have seen God face to face and lived."

Of the two problematic verses in the portion, this is perhaps the easiest to read in a metaphorical way. God does not appear at the wrestling match, nor speak to Jacob directly at this point in the text. Seeing God must mean something else.

Perhaps here, in this place, Jacob has confronted that which has been the most fearful to him throughout his 20+ years in Exile. It would appear he had avoided even thinking about what happened, what he had done, through all those years- we have no evidence of communication even with his mother Rebecca. But in this week's portion Jacob finally confronts this burden, and finally in confronting it, he is amazed to have made it through. He is given a new name to reflect the new person he can now become. Is it that confrontation with truth, that is to him, seeing the face of God?

The second reference bothers the sages more. Meeting up with his estranged brother, after they hug, Jacob says, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Now Esau is not a popular figure in later Jewish culture. Remember he is a wild man, a hunter, someone willing to sell his birthright to appease his appetite without nary a second thought.

Saadia Gaon is very uncomfortable with the comparison between God and Esau, and he retranslates the Biblical phrase to be- “to see your face is like seeing the face of the prominent.” Similarly Abraham Ibn Ezra says it should be translated as “the face of an angel,” and Sforino says, “a Divine Being.”

In what way is seeing Esau like seeing God? Is it merely Jacob’s fear that he would die, just as one would die upon seeing God? Is it that he propitiates Esau with offerings and gifts, as one might approach God?

Others argue that this verse is really the pivot of the change in their relationships. To be able to see in Esau, his twin, his opposite, his dark side, his enemy, a reflection of God, that is the transformation. It is this, on both sides, that allows, if not for a full reconciliation, at least for an end to further bloodletting and the ability to come together to bury their father.

How Jewish, that we understand “to see the face of God” as teaching us something concrete- about the need to confront our own stories and guilt, and about the importance of seeing even in our enemies, that image of God which resides in every human being. How Jewish that rather than exploring theology, we pull from the texts lessons for our behavior in this world.