

In this parsha, Moses famously asks God if He made behold His presence. God meets him halfway in granting Moses this request. “Station yourself... in a cleft in the rock...[as I pass by] you will see My back; but My face must not be seen” (33:21-23).

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנֶק הַיְנָה מְקוֹם אֶתִי וְנִצְבֹּתָ עַל-הַצּוּר:
וְהָיָה בַעֲבֹר כַּבְּדִי וְשִׁמְתִּיךָ בְּנִקְרַת הַצּוּר וְשִׁכַּתִּי כַּפִּי עָלֶיךָ
עַד-עֲבָרִי: וְהִסַּלְתִּי אֶת-כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת-אַחֲרֵי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ:

Abounding in mystery, this passage has captivated students of the Torah provoking question upon question. Tractate Berachot of the

Babylonian Talmud offers an answer to one of the most fascinating of these questions: What did Moses see when He beheld God's back?

“Rav Chana bar Bizna said in the name of R. Shimon Chasida: ‘This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, showed Moses the knot of tefillin’” (7A).

If you thought you'd get an answer that would resolve your questions, you were mistaken. Instead, the answer just provokes more questions. Before these questions arise, we are struck by the curiosity that God Himself

wears tefillin! The anthropomorphism of this characterization is astonishing.

Rashi explains that the knot of tefillin referred to is the one that rests on the back of the head.

Now that we have the image that Moses saw in place, we can explore what the significance of the image is. First, we have to ask what is inside the head tefillin. We learn about the head tefillin from three passages of the Torah:

Exodus 13:16 and Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18.

These verses refer to the “*totafot* between your

eyes.” *Totafot* is one of those untranslatable words of the Torah, like the word *Shabbat*.

These three verses and an additional verse from Exodus 13 sit within the box of tefillin. The same verses are in the arm and the head tefillin.

In addition to boxes, the tefillin are also composed of leather straps. These straps are knotted in both the arm and head tefillin. The knot of the head tefillin is the one that is relevant to our passage.

Notably, when Moses sees the tefillin, he only sees the straps and the knot, not the box.

On *Shabbat Shekalim* when we read *parshat Mishpatim*, I spoke about what holiness is and explained that it is a combination of two elements, a ritual element and moral element. The tefillin are the example of ritual par excellence. Unlike technology, which always has a function, the tefillin do not do anything, yet their presence on the body of the one saying morning prayers is undeniable. Anyone who has had the experience of wearing tefillin knows the remarkable feeling they produce. When we take them off, we feel their absence. They focus our

mind on the two places most relevant to prayer:
the heart and the head.

God's wearing of tefillin is curious.

Presumably, God wears tefillin all the time not only in the morning as we do. That means that God is constantly engaged with His full self in the lives of His creatures. That's important because when we encounter questions about God's existence, we should remember that God's existence isn't what's most important. God's concern for us is what's most important.

A God who exists but isn't concerned about our lives is not a God that should concern us.

Turning back again to the image Moses saw, we have to combine that image with the words of the verse in the Torah. “You will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

רְאִיתָ אֶת-אֲחֶרַי וּפְנֵי לֹא יֵרְאוּ:

The word for back is אַחֵר, which is related to the word *acharei*, which means after. What is “after” is how we describe what happened from the standpoint of the present. Often, we can only detect that God was concerned and present in

our lives *afterward*. After His presence has departed and we reflect upon our experience, we realize that He was with us. The second part of the verse confirms this. The word for “face” is פָּנָי, which is related to the word *lifnei*, which means “before.” This makes sense because when we see another’s face that is because the face is “before” us. God’s face is representative of what will be, the future. None of us can know the future let alone know how God will be present to us in the future. Only through the

reflecting on the past – remembering – can we know that God is present.

Knowing the future is reserved for prophets. We are the descendants of prophets, so we can see the future in a restricted sense, but prophets see the future in broad terms.

A perplexity arises: Moses saw God's back, not His face, but as a prophet Moses is capable of perceiving the future, which is represented by God's face. Why wouldn't God allow Moses to see His face?

God has told Moses that he cannot see His
face and live:

לֹא תֹכֵל לְרַאֲת אֶת-פָּנַי כִּי לֹא-יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחָי
(v. 20)

Our focus should be on the last two words,
וְחָי הָאָדָם. Even prophets cannot view the future
in its entirety. God's face emanates the future
writ large. Moses, who was granted more vision
than any other prophet, still cannot transcend his
finitude, his bounded existence. To break out of
his finitude would explode him.

His finitude, however, did not prevent Moses from a total view of the past: the tefillin knot on the back of God's head, which rests on what is called the occipital bone just above the nape of the neck. This bone reminds us of the statement of Jeremiah in which he describes the experience of prophecy. "[His word] was like a raging fire in my heart, Shut up in my bones; I could not hold it in, I was helpless" (20:9). The prophet's experience of God is in the bones of the prophet. The bone that protects the brain, the organ through which our communication with

God transpires is covered by the tefillin knot.

The image Moses saw reminds him of this conduit. Our wearing of tefillin also reminds of this conduit. As Maimonides identifies, the prophet is someone with a profound rationality and a profound imagination that interpenetrate one another.

Our tefillin bind us the way that our bodies ensure our finitude. They are not only our protection, they are also the objects by which we train our minds to experience the morsels of prophecy that are our heritage.

