

Parashah: Mishpatim
Read On: February 22, 2025 | 24 Shvat 5785
Torah: Exodus 21:1–24:18
Triennial: Exodus 23:20–24:18
Haftorah: Jeremiah 34:8–22; 33:25–26

Knowing God

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

It's a big week. We're still in Revelation, in נעשה ונשמע, we will hear and we will do. Some of us are with Moses, seeing God, seeing the bricks of sapphire and the pure sky beneath his feet. This is the climax. From the moment we were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, we have been trying to reach this place. We want to be with God again. The fruit which we ate there allowed us to know, and now, finally, we are ready to know God.

After all, isn't that what the whole point of the plagues was? Not just to free us, not just to break Pharaoh, but to make God known. "And Egypt shall know that I am the Lord." Over and over again, that refrain—ידעו מצרים—"Egypt will know." Knowledge is the axis on which the story turns. Pharaoh begins in ignorance: "Who is the Lord that I should obey him?" By the end, he knows all too well. The waters rise, the darkness blinds, and in the death of the firstborns, knowledge arrives. Too late.

But we—what about us? The plagues taught us too, shaping our understanding of God through blood and fire, through miracles that made His presence undeniable. We saw, and we knew. And now, at Sinai, we are ready to know in a new way—not through devastation, but through revelation. נעשה ונשמע—we will do, and we will hear. We will act first, stepping forward into the unknown, and then we will receive understanding. This is a knowing that binds rather than breaks.

But what about us? The plagues taught us too, shaping our understanding of God through blood and fire, through miracles that made His presence undeniable. "That you may tell in the ears of your son and your son's son what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them; that you may know that I am the Lord." The knowledge is not just for that generation but for every generation, passed down in story and memory, a fire kept alive through the retelling. And then, at the sea, knowledge shifts from history to immediacy: "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." Egypt had to learn through devastation. But Israel—Israel was meant to learn through deliverance.

If so, why did we need revelation? Surely it was enough that God had redeemed us from Egypt. Surely now, now we know God. We have seen God act. For what do we need to see God's face? After all, it's a risky proposition. No one can see God's face and live. Moses understood this intuitively when he met God at the burning bush. God revealed himself to Moses, and Moses **hid his face**. In a fantastic **midrash** on this verse, the rabbis debate whether or not it was proper that Moses hid his face. One argument is that as a measure for measure reward for having hid his face from God, God would later speak to Moses **face to face**. Another argues that as a measure for measure punishment for having hid his face, God would tell Moses that no one can **see his face and live**.

The midrash concludes by contrasting Moses's behavior at this initial potential moment of revelation with that of Nadav and Avihu in our parasha, at Revelation on Sinai. Nadav and Avihu were not meant to ascend all the way up the mountain with Moses. But they did, as did the seventy elders. And **they saw God**. And God chose not to punish them, not to send his hand against them at this point. But we know what will happen to them eventually. Nadav and Avihu will later be consumed by divine fire.

So should we seek to know God? Is Sinai the undoing of the banishment from Eden? God seems to want us to know him. But perhaps we should know him by story, at a remove. We do not need to seek Revelation. We need to remember that it happened.

Twelve Stones Standing

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah



**In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.*

The Sapphire Throne

Ilana Kurshan

White Fire: Poetry on the Parashah

It wasn't only Moses who climbed Sinai
To meet with God atop the mountain peak
Aaron and two sons, also the elders
Went up to steal, with Moses, one last peek.

They didn't get as high as Moses went
When on his own, God spoke words face-to-face.
But close. They reached the throne, at least its pavement
And God, thank God, did not howl, "Leave this place!"

Beneath the throne was sapphire stone like sky light,
The climbers gasped, still dizzy from the height.
"The heavens are my throne, the earth my footstool,"
Proclaimed Isaiah, having glimpsed this sight.

The blue dye of the snail is like the sea
The sea is like the sky where sits God's throne
We grasp the fringes, lift our eyes to heaven—
As much of heaven as we're ever shown.

Humans strive for heaven. It's not worth
It. Better to bring God down to this earth.

**The Talmud teaches that the Torah was given in black fire on white fire (Y. Shekalim 6:1). The black fire is the letters of the Torah scroll, and the white fire is the parchment background. In this column, consisting of a poem on each parashah, I will try to illuminate the white fire of Torah – the midrashim, stories, and interpretations that carve out the negative space of the letters and give them shape.*