



I Shall See Your Image in a Waking Vision'

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Psalm 17:15 'Esbe'ah Behaqitz Temunatekhah. A chapter from Rabbi Cohen's book, *Travels on the Road Not Taken: Towards a Bible-Based Theory of Jewish Spirituality*.

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Psalm 17,15: *'Esbe'ah Behaqitz Temunatekhah*

by Martin Samuel Cohen

Preliminary Remarks:

In his book, *Travels on the Road Not Taken: Towards a Bible-Based Theory of Jewish Spirituality*, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen deals with the fact that the five-part Torah (the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch) with strong priestly orientation is complemented by the five-part Psalter, which is imbued through and through with the prophetic spirit of ancient Israel. Starting with an investigation of who the Levitical singers were, whose hymnal was our Book of Psalms, Cohen dismisses the idea that they were members of some sort of junior priestly caste happily serving the "real" priests and works with the idea that they were probably viewed as rivals and disliked as purveyors of an alternate kind of Israelite spirituality, which view would then be reflected in the various Scriptural passages (e.g. Num 3:9 and 8:19) that refer to the Levites as servants given to the priests and as slaves. Cohen presumes enmity between the two groups and even goes so far as to posit that the cruel, unnamed enemies to whom the poets of the Psalter return again and again in their songs were none other than the Levites' priestly overlords or some especially hostile subgroup of the ancient priesthood. He writes: "[I]f the five-part Psalter of David was composed as a response to the five-part Tora of Moses, then the point can only have been to try to preserve a kind of ancient Judaism that risked being subverted, submerged and finally subsumed altogether by the institutionalized cultic faith that had power, money and the inestimable grand authority of the Jerusalem high priesthood behind it." In his book -- and by way of interpretation of some of the Psalms -- Cohen calls on Israel to be not only a people of priests, but also a people of prophets. In view of Israel's God being "supremely communicative", his call should not only be heard by Jews but also by Christians.

The author of the poem we call the seventeenth psalm starts off a bit slowly, labelling his effort merely as a prayer of David and leaving it for his readers to guess what specific incident in David's life was inspiring him.

It's not an easy poem. And the author's archaizing style, intended to remind his readers (he no doubt hoped) of the Hebrew of David's day, only makes the water even muddier than it would otherwise be. Still, the basic outline of the poet's religious world view is apparent and, for me, highly relevant. And I think I can see why such a way of looking at the world would have appealed to people trying to know God in a visceral, physical way.

Like the author of the sixty-third psalm - and like the authors of dozens of other poems in the Psalter - this poet too feels persecuted and hard done by. When he writes that his vindication will come from God, there's no problem catching his depressed drift: from God his absolution might (possibly, maybe even certainly) come, but not from frail, stupid, biased, bigoted human beings. When he calls on God to guard him "like the apple of His eye" from his mortal enemies - nameless scoundrels who are encroaching from every direction - there's no easy way, even for us jaded modern types, to dismiss his poetry as nothing more profound than the disheartened snivelling of a professional whiner. And when he switches, just for a brief moment, from the plural to the singular to describe his nemesis as "a lion eager for prey lying in hidden ambush" and calls upon God to rise up and strike the scoundrel down, there's no logical reason to interpret (and thereby to dismiss) his plaint as a generalized lament about the relative strength of goodness and evil in the world. The poet was a real human being who had a real enemy, one who loathed him and belittled him and who mocked him, as my favourite English teacher used to say, on a variety of levels.

About the poet's anonymous enemy, I don't have much information to offer. But there's quite a bit I can say about the psalmist himself. For one thing, he was a person who longed for God to speak to him directly. Indeed, I think the sixth verse of his poem could accurately be translated to yield the idea that God will speak to him *precisely* because he has called on God in the *precisely* right way to catch His ear and, presumably, to awaken within Him the desire to speak. But the poet doesn't only want to hear God's voice, he wants to see God as well. And he doesn't mind saying so.

The last verse of his poem is as confident as it is precise. "*Ani betzedeq ehezeh panekhah*, he writes, "*esbe ah behaqitz temunatekhah*. I give the words in Hebrew first because practically each one is laden with enough layers of evocative meaning to make it almost impossible to present it in English translation with anything but the palest, most ordinary accuracy.

To begin with the end, the poet is clear about what he wants: not merely to see God in some sort of dream vision, but to see Him in a waking state in the manner of the great pre-exilic prophets. Now, a few dozen centuries later, that might sound a bit banal. But in the context of the world in which the author lived, those were - to put it mildly - fighting words. And the punch they packed can only be gauged in terms of the degree to which they conflict with other received texts that present us with their own claim to unimpeachable authority. Indeed, the various instances of prophetic communion with God that were written up and preserved in the Bible are more or less *all* described precisely as waking visions. Yet, when the (priestly) Torah itself turns to the subject of such intimate experiences of the divine, it could not be clearer in its assertive, unambiguous insistence that Moses alone enjoyed that kind of familiarity with God. Moses, but no other prophet. Ever.

Perhaps we should look at that passage before we go on. In the twelfth chapter of the Book of Numbers, Scripture tells a brief story about the discomfort Aaron and Miriam felt with their brother Moses' status as divine confidant extraordinaire. The precise details of their complaint and the exceptional response it elicits are not that important in this context, but the words Scripture offers

as God's response to their impudence are. It's the *other* prophets, the Torah insists, who see God in dreams and visions - but Moses is different. God speaks to him "mouth to mouth", a phrase parallel both to the remark in Moses' obituary to the effect that God spoke to him "face to face" and to the notice in Scripture to the effect that God spoke to Moses "as one man speaks with another."

But it's not only how he *hears* that the Torah insists distinguishes Moses from the other prophets - it's specifically how he *sees* as well. It seems that they - the other prophets - do indeed see God in their dreams. Now this is a bit of a stunning anachronism in the text - are we really supposed to imagine that enough time has passed between the episodes related in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the book to allow the Torah to make generalized statements about the kind of prophetic vision the newly invested prophet-elders of Israel are wont to have? - but the more important point here is the assertion that Moses is unique. *Temunah hashem yabit*, the text asserts: Moses sees the *temunah* of God, precisely the aspect of God the psalmist specifically wants to see, while they, the other (and lesser) prophets, see something else, something less precise and, by extension, less transcendent. And what's more, when Moses sees this kind of divine image, he sees it while he's awake rather than being asleep or in some sort of mystic trance, which is precisely how the poet himself intends to experience God as well.

So what is this *temunah*? In modern Hebrew, the word has come to mean simply "picture", which is what it appears to mean in the Ten Commandments when the faithful Israelite is forbidden to fashion an image, presumably a fetish of some sort, of any creature that flies in the air or lives in the sea or on the land. But can that be what the term means when we read that Moses was superior to the other prophets because he alone merited seeing the divine *temunah*, presumably something better (that is, more real *and* more intimate) than the kind of image the others were able to see in their dreams?

There's an interesting passage in the Torah that's probably highly relevant in this regard - the semi-famous line in which Moses reminds the people that Israel's experience at Sinai was one of (mere) junior-grade prophecy on a national scale: "God spoke to you from within the fire," he admits, adding "but you *only* heard the sound of spoken words." Those are my italics, not Moses', but the point he's making couldn't be clearer and then, just in case it needed to be, he returns to the topic a few lines later to make his point even more plainly: "You didn't perceive any *temunah*," he continues, apparently forgetting for the moment that his audience consisted pretty much solely of the children of the people who stood at Sinai, "just sound...."

So we're left with the conclusion that, at least as far as our priestly Torah is concerned, there are three basic levels of prophecy: there's the mass experience the people had at Sinai during which they saw nothing at all of the divine image and were (or rather, had to be) content with hearing God's voice. Then, on a slightly more transcendent level, there are the prophets other than Moses who see *something* - something, but not the divine *temunah*. And then, of course, there's Moses himself, the only utterly transcendent prophet, who did indeed merit the experience of seeing God, not in visions or dreams, but in a waking experience in which he was able to perceive the actual divine image. (And even in Moses' case, it was an acquired taste - in its account of Moses' first up-close encounter with the divine at the burning bush, Scripture makes a point of insisting that he immediately covered his face once he realized what was happening "for he was afraid to look at God.")

Other passages in Torah, for example the famous aside that "no human being can see God and survive the experience," seem to buttress this general understanding of how people may perceive God. But this priestly view of things was apparently as foreign - and irrelevant - to the pre-exilic prophets as it was to their Levitical followers later on. *They* saw God and they *all* lived to tell the tale. What's more, they seem to have cultivated the experience with relish and enthusiasm - and without the slightest trace of suicidal mania. And what the author of the seventeenth psalm wants is precisely to experience the *temunah* of God in a waking, conscious state. To perceive God (if I

may misquote Scripture slightly) "as one person might stand before another." To know God *precisely* as the Torah insists only Moses ever could. To survive *precisely* that experience of the divine that the Torah says unequivocally none but Moses could ever live through.

And he doesn't just want to taste this experience once or twice either. The verb he uses - "*esbe"ah*" - implies that he wants to gorge himself on it, to experience it to complete (perhaps even excessive) satisfaction. (Another Biblical text uses the same verb to describe the way someone might cram so much honey into himself that he would actually have to puke *some* of it out before he could ever manage to digest *any* of it.) It's true that classical Hebrew also uses the term in a variety of less gross passages to denote simply satiety, but I think that the poet is using the term in its coarser sense here, just as he uses it elsewhere in this same poem to refer not simply to having enough wealth for one's own needs, but to having enough to leave behind as a bequest to one's children, which is to say: having more than enough.

The verb in the first half of his verse is also loaded. "*Ehezeh*, he says - shall *behold* the face of God. This verb too has its own deeply evocative connotative meaning in the history of Israelite prophecy. I've already mentioned above that the author of the Books of Samuel makes a special point of noting that the original Hebrew name for the ecstatic prophets of Israel was *hozim* - seers (or rather, see-ers), individuals who were so called (I assume) because they beheld God. Even the Torah, with its essentially negative view of prophecy, uses the term in its account of the great covenantal meal the elders held on the slopes of Sinai to mean precisely what it apparently did mean. *Vayehazu "et ha"elohim*, the Torah says: the elders *beheld* God. (It's true that the Torah does seek to defuse the shock value of *that* remark by prefacing it with the note that in this exceptional instance - and, presumably, in this exceptional instance alone - God refrained from killing them for having done so. But that kind of back-tracking-before-the-fact is just another example of the typical priestly knee-jerk reaction even to the intimation that anyone but Moses could ever have beheld the divine *temunah*.)

So if we put all that together, we can indeed interpret the last verse of the seventeenth psalm as an ancient poet's self-assurance that *despite* the insults and attacks of his enemies and *despite* the hostility of the priestly overlords and their anti-prophetic Torah and despite the almost terrifying hubris inherent even in the idea (let alone the actual practice) of seeking to see God - despite it all, "I am justified to seek Your face and, indeed, I shall gorge myself on the waking, conscious experience of Your *temunah*."

As I noted above, the poet approaches us behind the mask of David, the ancient prophet-king of Israel whose inestimably great cachet was apparently deemed sufficient to justify the psalmists' efforts to gaze at the godhead. But of which particular event in David's life was he thinking? In other words, what *specific* event does the poet imagine led the king to write this *specific* poem?

Radak, whose commentary to the psalms is among the most psychologically and theologically astute of them all, writes that it was in the aftermath of the incident involving Uriah the Hittite (and his lovely wife, Bathsheba) that David wrote this particular psalm.

The story is one of the Bible's best known, but perhaps I should retell it briefly just in case you've repressed (or forgotten or never knew) some of the details. It starts off with David having a smoke (or something) on the roof of his palace late one afternoon. He's strolling around and suddenly he sees a beautiful woman bathing on her own (slightly lower) roof. David takes great interest, makes the appropriate inquiries and learns that she is none other than Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's soldiers.

Anyway, one thing leads to another and before you know it - the Biblical storyteller delicately covers this part of the story in half of one sentence - she's pregnant. David is not amused. (Neither, we may assume, is Bathsheba, but she doesn't say much in the story. In fact, she

doesn't say anything at all unless you want to count sending a two-word note ("I'm pregnant!") as saying something. Of course, the story is about him, not her ... but still, you'd have thought the storyteller would at least give her something to do aside from getting pregnant, letting David know and (presumably) making her peace with what comes next. But he didn't.)

At any rate, what does come next is that David has to act quickly to cover up his misdeed. Of course, there wouldn't be that much to cover up if Uriah were living at home and sleeping with his wife - she could always claim that the child was her husband's even if he did somehow inherit David's red hair - but Uriah is simply too decent a fellow - this is Biblical irony at its best - to take pleasure in his own bed while his fellow soldiers are bivouacking it in the field even if he is legitimately on leave at home. So David goes to plan B: he sends word to General Joab and gets Uriah put in the front lines when he returns, whereupon he is duly killed during the next skirmish with the Ammonites. End of problem.

Not exactly. David moves Bathsheba into the palace about eight seconds after her formal period of mourning ends. Scripture doesn't say precisely how long *that* was, but we can presume Bathsheba was installed in the seraglio in plenty of time for no one to find it unreasonable for David to acknowledge her unborn child as his own.

Now the prophet Nathan gets involved. God makes the situation clear to the prophet, who comes to David with a parable about a rich man who steals a poor man's lamb to roast for lunch one day when a friend drops in unexpectedly. Nathan lays it on a bit thick - the best part is when he says the lamb was such a beloved member of the poor man's family that it was almost a daughter to him - but David still misses the point, taking Nathan's story for an account of a real incident and deciding on the spot that the rich man should be put to death and (if that's not enough) fined four times the cost of a replacement lamb as a (presumably posthumous) punishment for his larcenous greed. Nathan, who had presumably hoped for just that response, now summons up his courage and faces the king. *Atah ha"ish*, he says - "You are that man!" - packing more righteous indignation into two words than most authors can in two chapters.

What follows are only just desserts: since David was prepared to murder for the sake of his desire for another man's wife, so shall he have to endure the ignominy of knowing that another man shall sleep with some of his own wives. And not only that, but the child with whom Bathsheba is pregnant shall die.

Both predictions come true - with the added ironic twist that it is none other than David's own son, Absalom, who ends up sleeping with ten of his father's concubines - but David doesn't need to wait to see either fulfilled. "I have sinned before God," he declares openly and guilelessly. And the prophet wastes no time in delivering the message of divine absolution David so intensely desired. "God has removed your sin," he declares confidently, adding that David shall not die, even if the son to be born unto him must.

From the Jewish perspective, this (and neither the death of Uriah *nor* the child's death) is the centre of the story and its high point: the moment of repentance so pure and real that it alone serves to avert the divine decree even though the child's life must still be forfeit. And this is the moment to which the commentators assign the composition of the seventeenth psalm. We can quibble about whether the poem was written by David himself or by a late poet writing as David, but the more essential point is the poet's cry for vindication as he contemplates the bitter aftermath of his sin ... and his no less authentic assertion, all the more moving given its awful context, that, justified, he shall yet behold the face of God and not only see it in the normal prophetic way, but actually stuff himself with the experiential knowledge of God to the point of safety (and then some).

The poet knows he has sinned, as all terrestrials must. But he has done his best to achieve a state of total repentance and he wishes to be rewarded for *those* efforts in a way as profoundly

meaningful as the appropriate punishment for his misdeeds would have been severe. I imagine him figuring that he can't possibly have sinned as grievously as David, then asking himself why his reward then should be any less great. It's not such a bad question

No one who yearns to know God cannot pause, at least occasionally, to wander about the inherent blasphemy in the whole enterprise of any human being seeking to gaze on the godhead in the first place. After all, Scripture does say fairly unequivocally that no human may see God and survive the experience. And if the accounts of the prophets seem to belie that assertion, then that surely only leaves us on the horns of a difficult dilemma, not resting comfortably in the afterglow of its resolution!

The seventeenth psalm, especially if Radak was right about the incident in David's life that inspired it, offers a second clue, dear readers. There is regret in this world and there's also remorse. But to overwhelm the sense of crippling, blasphemous absurdity that continually threatens to destabilize any thinking individual's quest for God, neither will suffice. To stand in the presence of God, one must first learn how to return unto God in complete repentance, that state of transcendental contrition that transfigures the individual who experiences it and makes that person, like Saul at Givat Ha"elohim, into a different person than he or she was a moment earlier.

Like all truly religious experiences, repentance cannot be sought in the rules of complex rituals and neither can it be prepared for or induced through the singing of hymns or the study of sacred texts. It is, therefore, something elusive and very difficult to attain ... but it's also the natural condition of the human heart that longs for God with a purity of purpose unsullied by laziness, apathy or greed, the absolutely requisite state that one must attain prior to seeking to know God sensually and passionately. And so we have it put plainly: to see God, one must first dare to look honestly and openly at oneself

Notes:

"Esbe"ah Behaqitz Temunatekhah: Psalm 17:15. There are dozens of texts in the Psalter that can be characterized either as personal or communal laments-poems in which the poet decries his personal fate or the fate of his nation. The most forceful personal laments are Psalms 6, 7, 9, 10, 28, 31, 36, 55, 57 and 64. The best known communal laments are Psalms 12, 14, 60, 85 and 126. All of these texts are discussed in detail by W.H. Bellinger Jr. in his *Psalmody and Prophecy* (Sheffield [U.K.], 1984 =Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, volume 27), pp. 32-77. The author of the seventeenth psalm asserts that his vindication will come from God in the second verse of his poem, following the translation of the Hebrew mishpat in the 1985 Jewish Publication Society Bible. The reference to the poet's enemy being like a lion in ambush is found at verse 12 and the call to God to bring about his enemy's downfall is at verse 13. The poet's assertion that God will speak to him is found at verse 6. The remark that God spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth" is found at Numbers 12:8. There are references to God speaking to Moses "face to face" at Exodus 33:11 and at Deuteronomy 34:10. The reference to God speaking to Moses "as one man speaks to another" may also be found at Exodus 33:11. The word *temunah* appears in the Ten Commandments at Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8. Moses notes that the Israelites' experience of God at Sinai was strictly aural and not at all visual at Deuteronomy 4:12. (He reiterates this point a few lines later at verse 15.) The text in Numbers 12 seems to be using *temunah* and mar"eh ("vision") as referring to distinctly different experiences of the divine, but cf. Job 4:16, where they are used as parallel terms. Scripture notes that Moses covered his face when he realized that he was about to behold God at the burning bush at Exodus 3:6. The remark to the effect that no human being can see God and live is found at Exodus 33:20. The reference to vomiting after eating a surfeit of honey is at Proverbs 25:16. The author of the seventeenth psalm refers to having enough wealth to leave behind a bequest to one's children in verse 14 of his poem. The story of how David arranged for Uriah's death and an account the aftermath of that deed are found in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. Bathsheba's note ("I'm pregnant") is cited at 2 Samuel

11:5. The account of how Absalom slept with his father's concubines is told at the end of 2 Samuel 16. Radak, in his comment to verse 2, connects the composition of the seventeenth psalm to the incident involving Uriah and Bathsheba, as does Sforno. Rashi assigns the composition of the psalm to the period immediately following that incident in his comment to Psalm 17:11. We can be certain that the story of David and Bathsheba played a role in the psalmists' thinking from the beginning of the fifty-first psalm, where it is specifically noted that that poem was written by David as a response to Nathan's intervention in the matter. Furthermore, it could certainly also be the case that the more than slightly obscure references to the death of a child that appear, if they are really there, in the superscriptions to the ninth and forty-sixth psalms (the latter even less obviously than the former) might well refer to this incident as well.

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