

The Still Face Experiment in the Age of the Coronavirus
A Sermon for Tazria Metzarah
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In 1975, the psychologist Edward Tronick first presented the results of the “Still Face Experiment”. He focused on the powerful attachment babies had with the face of their mothers, and the way they study every movement every facial expression. They also noted how babies work to illicit responses in the form of facial expressions, a smile or the widening of the mother’s eyes was a source of connection and delight to the child. He then described the phenomenon of what happens when the mother’ face becomes non-responsive and expressionless. How “rapidly the baby sobers and grows wary. How they make repeated attempts to get the interaction they are used to and resume its reciprocal pattern. When these attempts fail, the infant withdraws orienting its face and body away from the mother with a withdrawn, hopeless facial expression. It remains one of the most replicated findings in developmental psychology. The Still Face Experiment is a universal phenomenon.

I suppose that none of this should be all that surprising. Afterall, the first thing that a newborn sees is the face of their mother looking with such intense love that it naturally becomes an emotional touchstone. Each facial expression is carefully monitored by a newborn, and the baby soon learns how to illicit responses. As a result, exposure to a mother’s expressionless face would naturally be disconcerting for the an infant. The fact is that we never lose our fascination with the human face at any age, whether a friend, a loved one or someone sit next to at a baseball game. This idea was beautifully expressed in a poem by Kahlil Gibran

Faces

BY KAHLIL GIBRAN

I have seen a face with a thousand countenances, and a face that was but a single countenance as if held in a mould.

I have seen a face whose sheen I could look through to the ugliness beneath, and a face whose sheen I had to lift to see how beautiful it was.

I have seen an old face much lined with nothing, and a smooth face in which all things were graven.

I know faces, because I look through the fabric my own eye weaves, and behold the reality beneath.

Think of how the face of loved one become an object of fascination and how when you fall in love you memorize every aspect of a person's face, every expression and reflect on it. In many ways the face is a canvas of human emotions, and at times a mystery like the Mona Lisa. How much ink has been spilled debating whether DaVinci's subject was smiling or frowning?

As Jews, our relationship with God, our very theology is measured in the face of God the ultimate parent.

Our ability to know God is reflected in the Divine face. Moses' request to see God's face is denied. There is only so much that a human being can know of God.

Our greatest blessing is measured in the light that shines from God's face as it says in the Priestly blessing: *Yissa Adonai Panav Elecha Veyasem Lecha Shalom: May God lift up the Divine face toward you and bless you with peace.*

By the same logic our greatest curse is the idea of Hester Panim, the hiding of God's face from us.

"I will hide my face from them," he said, "and see what their end will be; for they are a perverse generation, children who are unfaithful. Deuteronomy 32:20

While there are those who would argue that we are living in an age of *hester panim*, where the face of God is hidden, what is beyond dispute is that we are hiding our faces from one another for the first time in American history.

Today we are living in an age where our understanding of the face has been turned on its head. Like most of you, I grew up with the idea that the only people who covered their faces were people who were trying to hide their identity, thus anyone wearing a mask of any kind was immediately suspect.

Today it is just the opposite we are being advised to wear a mask, to cover our mouths and our noses to protect ourselves and others from the coronavirus. In some communities it is law. We are living in an age where people who do not wear a mask are more suspect than those who do.

Normally, going out is an opportunity to engage with others, and when staying home we are more isolated. Today it is more likely that you will see the faces of our co-workers and friends at home on your computer screen than when you go out. How many of us had seders on Zoom. While this age of Hester Panim, the hiding of the face has been a novelty for many, we are also experiencing a surrealistic moment where people who are at the nexus between life and death are not being subjected to an expressionless face, but no face at all.

Tragically, 50,000 Americans have died from the Coronavirus and many without seeing the face of a loved one, or even the face of their doctors or nurses as they are wearing masks. In many cases the medical staff is so over taxed that they die alone. Of course people should be protected, of course they should wear masks but for the patient to be deprived of a face to look into as they leave this world it is a horrifying version of the Still Face Experiment, and intensifies the loneliness of death.

It is a strange time indeed.

Is it even possible to search for the face of the other in a time of pandemic? The Jewish approach to this question can be found in our portion of Tazria Metzorah. The main subject of the portion is a fearful contagious skin disease called Tza-ra-at. The recommendations of the Torah sound familiar to us today: Washing and Quarantining.

What is fascinating is how the disease was diagnosed?

The Torah specifically mandates that it must be done by the Priest. The person who serves as the representative of God to the people. The person who leads the worship of God in the holiest places, the house of God is also sent to the home of the person with this illness to diagnose it. It is not done from afar, nor is Tzaraat self-diagnosed. For the representative of God there must be a face to face encounter. There has to be human connection. While the person with Tza-ra-at may carry a contagious disease, they are still a human being. In the midst of the illness there is a requirement for the priest and the patient to see each other's faces. The lesson to the people was made clear. God's concern for each person is evident in the presence of the priest and so should ours.

The same challenges present in the Biblical world are evident in our own.

- How do we see the face of the other amidst the pandemic even with masks on and value still each other as beings created in the Divine image.
- How do we allow those with the illness to see the faces of their friends and relatives and experience their love even virtually?

Last week I created a [podcast with Dr. Ricardo Rosenkranz](#) about his work as a medical ethicist at Northwestern University. We spoke of his work leading a class on ethics to medical students and the care and compassion We spoke of the need for an ethical roadmap at a time when we are in uncharted waters. Dr. Rosenkranz spoke of the danger of the situational ethics of triage when one or two doctors are making life and death choices that are usually reserved for a panel. What does it say about the values of our society that so many people dying alone? He spoke of those doctors and nurses who make a point of making use of their cell phones so that they can include relatives and friends on facetime calls, so that the person at the end of their lives can see the face of a loved one and hear their comforting words. All of this speaks to the innate need we have to look into the caring faces of those that we love as much at the end of our lives as when we come into the world experiencing the power of the human connection.

When a vaccine is found, and we have found a way to defeat the Coronavirus a number of questions will have to be answered:

Why was this country so unprepared?

Why did we not have enough PPE, Personal Protective equipment?

Why did we not have enough respirators?

Why did we not have a more defined plan of action?

But we will have to answer other questions, why did we do so little to afford people dignity at the end of their lives?

Why were people consigned to leave this world without seeing the faces of their loved ones and they them?

While the Torah has little to teach us about medical practices, it has much to say about the sacred nature of the human being, and the blessing of the countenance of God reflected in the face of another! That need to connect facially is a defining feature of the human condition from the earliest newborn to the most senior. The lesson of the priest who saw not only the illness but the face of the patient is vital model for our day as well, and will help us define the ethical nature of the society we live in and the one that we will build for our children and grandchildren.