

What Does God Know?

Yehudah Mirsky

And it came to pass that the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites sighed from the labor, and their cries rose to the Lord from their labor. And the Lord heard their cries, and He remembered His covenant, that of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. And the Lord saw the children of Israel and the Lord knew.

EXODUS 2:23-25

THE SIMPLE EXEGETICAL QUESTION POSED BY THIS TEXT IS: WHAT DID, OR DOES, GOD KNOW? THE VERSE COMES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NARRATIVE OF MOSES' SOJOURN IN MIDIAN AND SERVES AS PREFACE to his calling to return to Egypt. This context casts the simple exegetical question in a different light: what is this divine knowledge that constitutes the prelude to redemption?

Traditional Jewish commentators follow two distinct approaches to this text. In one, God's knowledge approximates empathy, an ability to recognize and understand the suffering of others. The other sees God's knowledge as insight, the ability to discern experiences, potentialities and significances hidden from view, sealed in the fastness of the human heart. Each approach yields valuable lessons for the meaning of knowledge in our own lives.

Knowledge as Empathy

Some commentators see God's "knowledge" as the divine ability to understand the suffering of the Israelite slaves, an understanding which galvanizes God to action.

Yehudah Mirsky is a writer and political analyst in Washington, D.C. He writes regularly for The Economist. His essays and reviews have appeared in Yale Law Journal, Washington Monthly, The New Leader, Jerusalem Report and The Forward.

Rashi, the eleventh century author of the most widely read commentaries on Jewish texts, explains that “and the Lord knew” means that “He directed His heart toward them [‘heart’ indicating both thought and feeling] and did not avert His eyes.”

Nachmanides, writing two centuries later, agrees with Rashi’s interpretation, adding that “At first God did indeed avert his gaze from the Israelites, with the result that they were devoured...but then He turned towards them..and thus moved to redeem them even before their time.”

The image of God not averting His eyes is important; we in our daily ways are all too often tempted to avert our eyes from the sufferings around us. Yet an unaverted gaze is the prerequisite to doing good. By contrast, the Kabbalistic notion of *hester panim*, literally the hiding of the face, connotes periods in human history when God’s face, as it were, is hidden, thus giving license to evil.

Commenting on Nachmanides’ interpretation, Rav Yeruham Halevi, a prominent thinker in the *musar* movement of the late 19th and early 20th century¹, elaborates that the time of Egyptian bondage was indeed a time of *hester panim*. This he takes to mean that when God’s face was hidden, the Israelites were under the sway of the attribute of Judgment (associated in rabbinic thought with the specific name of God, *Elohim*, that appears in our text. This divine attribute encompasses some notion of mercy but does not bear “sensitivity to every detail.” That sensitivity comes only with the fullness of God’s countenance and bears within it the secret of redemption (*Hever Ma’amarim*, No. 11). Human suffering, it would seem, is more easily countenanced and ignored when viewed in general terms, and less easily if one looks closely at individual suffering.

This relation of “knowledge” to the understanding of another’s suffering is no mere homiletic; it finds expression in the Jewish legal principle of *ona’at devarim*, the prohibition against verbal abuse. The archetype of verbal abuse is that directed against the *ger*, a term which in rabbinic literature generally refers to a convert, but retains overtones of its original and literal meaning of “stranger” or “other.” Indeed the verse

¹ For a general introduction to *musar* see Immanuel Etkes, “Rabbi Israel Salanter and His Psychology of *Musar*,” in Authur Green, ed. *Jewish Spirituality*, Vol. II. The *musar* movement laid great emphasis on moral responsibility and thoughtful introspection as significant elements of the religious life.

which serves as the textual basis for the prohibition of *ona’at devarim* draws together all these senses neatly: “And do not oppress the *ger*, as you have known the soul of the *ger*, since you were *gerim* in the land of Egypt” (EXODUS 23:9).

Maimonides, in his discussion of *ona’at devarim* [*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Mekhirah* (Laws of Sale) 14:18] considers verbal abuse a graver sin than financial exploitation. While the latter falls under the jurisdiction of human courts of justice and is susceptible to the conventional laws of proof and evidence, the former is *masur la-lev*, literally “given over to the heart.” In other words, the nature and extent of the damages inflicted by verbal abuse can be known only to the one on the receiving end, and to God, who will seek justice on the sufferer’s behalf.

The lesson here for human knowledge is twofold: First, human knowledge can and should be directed toward a full understanding of the experiences, and certainly the sufferings, of others. Second, we see from Maimonides’ discussion of *ona’at devarim* that God’s knowledge of the sufferings of the other devolves upon me a commandment to know, to draw on my own experiences in formulating a response to the needs and sufferings of others. Ultimately, the link between myself and the other is that God knows us both.

Knowledge as Insight

The second school of thought sees God’s knowledge as more insightful than empathic: God sees certain things in the Israelites hidden from normal observation, specifically a moral and spiritual development which makes Israel capable of redemption.

Thus, *Targum Yonatan* (a second century Aramaic translation/commentary on the Torah) says that God saw the *teshuvah*, the repentance, done secretly by the Israelites in Egypt, each unaware of one another’s repentance. God was aware of the moral and spiritual effort of the individual slaves. Ovdiah Sforno (c. 1470-1550) seems to combine the two senses of knowledge, empathy and insight, saying that God “knew the wounds of their heart, and that their prayers and cries were with a full heart...”

Two commentators writing at the close of the 19th century expand upon this view. The third Gerer rebbe, Yehudah Leib Alter (1847-1905), in

his work *Sefat Emet*, comments on the biblical verse: “[the Israelites] could not bring their thoughts into actuality...there is a kind of thought that is not yet complete, such that the individual is not even aware of it, only the Creator. Even though the hearts of the Israelites were good, their own interiority (*p’nimiyyut*) was not clear to them.”

Similarly, Naftali Zevi Yehudah Berlin (1817-1893), the last dean of the Volozhin Yeshiva, in his Bible commentary *Ha’amek Davar* says: “Pharaoh tried to degrade the thoughts of Israel...to the point where they could not cry out, like one whose thoughts are degraded, and does not understand that his knowledge can be elevated—but God saw and knew...”

According to these interpretations, God saw potential and growth in the Israelites that they themselves, lowly and oppressed, could not see. Thus, while the Jewish people were redeemed because they had faith in God, they were also redeemed because God had faith in them.

This too is no mere homiletic point, but bears directly on human actions. My capacity to act meaningfully in the world is predicated on a belief that my actions are indeed meaningful—in religious terms, in the faith that God knows what it is that I do and try to do, and am capable of doing. As Reb Zadok Ha-Cohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900) put it: “Just as one must believe in God, so too he must believe in himself; this is to say that...he must believe that his own soul derives from the Wellspring of Life and that God revels and basks in him when he does His will” (*Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik*, section 154).

Ultimately, these two kinds of knowledge, empathy and insight, are complementary. Neither the raw untamed suffering of the other nor the possibility of my own moral and spiritual worth are truly accessible to me unless my knowledge of these realities is grounded in God, the Source of all Compassion, the guarantor of human possibility. Without God, the sufferer remains locked in pain, the individual trapped in mortality and mediocrity. If God, however, knows the suffering, knows the possibilities of the human spirit, that knowledge is itself transforming and liberating, revealing the whole person, the sufferer and the striver. This is the knowledge that bears within it the possibility of redemption—“and the world will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters fill the seas” (ISAIAH 10:9).