

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Yitro

ENCOUNTERING GOD'S IMAGE

וַיָּבֹא אֶהָרֹן וְכָל זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֶכְל־לֶחֶם עִם־חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים:
וַיִּשָּׂח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה עִלָּה וַיִּזְבַּחַם לְאֱלֹהִים

And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came together with all of the elders of Israel to partake in the meal before God with Moses and his father in law.

[Exodus 18:12]

It has been taught by Rabbi Ishmael: Why does the verse say that the meal was eaten “before God”? Didn’t they actually eat before Moses? Rather, the Torah is teaching us that anyone who encounters another person is like one who encounters God’s presence. [TP Erwin 30b]

AVODAH COMMENTARY: The teaching above suggests that for us to understand what it means that we are all created in God’s image (and the ethical implications of this fact) it is necessary to actually encounter that image through our relationships with other human beings. Put another way, encountering God’s image through a variety of human interactions can develop into the core of one’s spiritual practice and ethical life.

This idea is so strong that Rabbi Ishmael relocates the center of the religious encounter described in the verses above from its apparent place – a ritual sacrifice in which offerings are made to God – to an entirely different place – the encounter between the elders and Moses, in order to make his interpretive point.

QUESTIONS: This week’s Torah portion also contains the ten commandments, the second of which forbids us to make an image of God. If capturing God’s image in stone or wood is forbidden, why are we so strongly urged to search for it in the faces of others? If God has no “likeness or image,” what does it mean to say that we are created in God’s image?