YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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**PARASHAT PEKUDEI**

**"For the Cloud Rested Upon It"**

**Rav Shimon Klein**

**"And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting"**

And he put up the courtyard round about the *Mishkan* and the altar, and he set up the screen of the court gate. So Moshe finished the work.

And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*. And Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*. And when the cloud was lifted from over the *Mishkan*, *Bnei Yisrael* proceeded in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not lifted, then they did not journey until it was lifted. For the cloud of God was upon the *Mishkan* by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all of *Bnei Yisrael* throughout their journeys. (*Shemot* 40:33-38)

The closing verses of *Sefer Shemot* constitute a climax. Over the course of many chapters, we have read about the construction of the *Mishkan*, and now the work is completed: "So Moshe finished the work." A cloud covers the Tent of Meeting and God's glory fills the *Mishkan*.

This description of the Divine Presence – in the form of cloud, fire, and the glory of God – is familiar to the people from previous events, but now it happens in a new place, the recently-completed Tent of Meeting. In this *shiur*, we will conduct a sort of review of the various appearances of the Divine Presence: Which place is involved in each appearance?[[1]](#footnote-1) What function does His revelation fill in each instance? How powerful is His Presence in each case?

It should be noted at the outset that Divine revelation to human beings through speech and prophetic visions – without fire or cloud – is a phenomenon that exists throughout *Tanakh*. The addition of fire and cloud introduces something further. God announces, as it were, to His people: “I am here; I present Myself as a player on the field of life, within space, time, and context.” There is interaction between God and His people, such that His Presence is transformed from an abstract idea into a real, living, dynamic reality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**God guides and illuminates**

The first appearance of the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud is immediately after the nation's stopover in Sukkot:[[3]](#footnote-3)

They journeyed from Sukkot and encamped in Etam, at the edge of the wilderness. And God went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might go by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (*Shemot* 13:20-22)

*Bnei Yisrael* leave Sukkot, their first stop on the journey, and the Presence accompanies them, travelling before them in a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire by day and by night. The Presence in this instance is of relatively minor intensity and power. The journey from Sukkot to Etam is described in one single verse, and the next verse repeats for emphasis, as it were: “Know, student of the Torah, that during the journey described here, God went before them." This "follow-up" description presents the pillar of fire and of cloud as something that "facilitates,” rather than as a subject in its own right.

The pillar of cloud is "to lead them the way" by day; the pillar of cloud is there in order "to give them light." The difference between these two functions allows us a glimpse into the nature of these two phenomena. The pillar of cloud relates to the essence – the journey – while the pillar of fire gives light. More broadly, the cloud, which blurs vision, is conducive to an encounter with God; fire, on the other hand, symbolizes His actions and manifestations.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As noted, in both ways – as guide or as light – God's revelation serves an auxiliary, facilitating role, going "before the camp."[[5]](#footnote-5) This is the situation at this initial stage. As the journey progresses, however, the situation changes.

**God wages war on their behalf against Egypt**

And the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud went from before them and stood behind them, and it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and it was a cloud and darkness [to the former], but it gave light by night [to the latter], and one did not approach the other all night long. (*Shemot* 14:19-20)

These verses describe what happened while the Egyptians pursued *Bnei Yisrael*, just before the splitting of the Red Sea. God's angel leaves his position and moves alongside the pillar of cloud, in between the two camps. This serves to create a barrier between the two camps, such that "one did not approach the other all night long." In this description, God protects through His very Presence, separating the camps and guarding the camp of Israel. In addition, He brings darkness to the Egyptians while giving light by night to Israel.

Then comes the venturing into the Red Sea:

And *Bnei Yisrael* went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, and the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued and went in after them to the midst of the sea – all of Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And it was that in the morning watch that God looked to the camp of Egypt through the pillar of fire and of cloud, and He brought confusion into the Egyptian camp. And He removed the wheels of their chariots, so that they drove heavily, and the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from before Israel, for God is fighting for them against Egypt.”

And God said to Moshe, “Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians – upon their chariots and upon their horsemen." (*Shemot* 14:22-26)

The Egyptians chase *Bnei Yisrael* into the midst of the sea. God looks out towards the Egyptian camp, revealing Himself in the pillar of fire and cloud. The result is chaos, and the recognition on the part of the Egyptians that God is fighting on behalf of *Bnei Yisrael* against them. In contrast to the minor function of the fire and cloud thus far, they now become more dominant, sparing *Bnei Yisrael* a physical confrontation with Egypt and carrying it out in their stead. This is another stage in the manifestation of God's Presence, leading to the next appearance, where He becomes involved in what is happening amongst the nation itself.

**Cloud, fire, and encounter**

Moshe said to Aharon, “Say to all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*: Come near before God, for He has heard your murmurings.” And it was, as Aharon spoke to the whole congregation of *Bnei Yisrael*, that they looked towards the wilderness, and behold – the glory of God appeared in the cloud. (*Shemot* 16:9-10)

This description follows the crisis of trust between the people and Moshe and Aharon. *Bnei Yisrael* journey from Eilim; they leave their station and venture into the wilderness, where there begins a confrontation that includes complaints about Moshe and Aharon.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Moshe addresses the people, "Come near before God, for He has heard your murmurings," thereby inviting God to appear and have His say. God acquiesces, the people turn towards the wilderness, and "behold, the glory of God appeared in the cloud." Through His Presence, God supports Moshe and Aharon and hears the people's complaints, a form of involvement in what is happening amongst the people. It is interesting that at this stage, God still refrains from coming into the midst of the camp of Israel.

The next episode in which there is involvement of God's Presence is at the Revelation on Mount Sinai:

All the people answered together and they said, “All that God has spoken we will do.” And Moshe reported the words of the people to God. And God said to Moshe, “Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you and believe you forever.” And Moshe told the words of the people to God. (*Shemot* 19:8-9)

The people hear the Ten Commandments and accept them, and this is the appropriate time to deepen their trust in Moshe: "God said to Moshe, ‘Behold, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever.’" God is going to come to Moshe in a thick cloud and the nation will hear when He speaks to him; Moshe's part and role in God's Torah with thus be made clear, and the people will then believe in him forever.

The next source speaks of Moshe ascending the mountain in order to receive the tablets of stone:

And it was on the third day in the morning that there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud upon the mountain and the sound of a shofar exceedingly loud, and all the people in the camp trembled. And Moshe led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai smoked in every part, because God descended upon it in fire, and the smoke of it ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And then the voice of the shofar sounded louder and louder: Moshe speaks, and God answered him with a voice. And God came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and God called Moshe up to the top of the mountain, and Moshe went up. And God said to Moshe, “Go down; charge the people, lest they break through to God to gaze and many of them perish. And let the *kohanim* also, who come near to God, sanctify themselves, lest God break forth upon them." (*Shemot* 19:15-25)

Moshe ascends the mountain, which is covered in cloud. On the third day, the event becomes more intense. A heavy cloud rests there, and there is a multi-sensory experience: thunder and lightning, a very loud sounding of the shofar, and smoke as from a furnace. The response on the part of the nation is terror. The sound of the shofar continues to grow stronger. At the same time, Moshe leads the people, standing at the foot of the mountain, towards God, drawing them into this awesome event. When God descends on the mountain, He calls Moshe to the summit.

Now there is no more "pillar" of cloud or fire, defined and limited in space and in function. Instead, there is an intensive, powerful, multi-dimensional Presence of God upon the mountain, and the people are afraid. At the same time, a new inner movement has been born – a great thirst for closeness to God. Moshe is sent back to the people to warn them against breaking through to gaze upon God.

Another encounter comes with Moshe's subsequent ascent:

Moshe ascended the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. And the glory of God rested upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; He called to Moshe on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of God was like a devouring fire at the top of the mountain in the eyes of *Bnei Yisrael*. And Moshe went into the midst of the cloud, and went up the mountain, and Moshe was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (*Shemot* 24:15-18)

At the end of the Revelation of the Ten Commandments and after all the commandments of *Parashat Mishpatim* have been conveyed to Moshe, he ascends the mountain, having been summoned by God from amidst the cloud. He spends six days upon the mountain, and then on the seventh day, he enters into the cloud. These days point to a process of rapprochement and sanctification in the encounter between Moshe and God. The forty days spent atop the mountain are a continuation of this ascent.

**In the Tent of Meeting outside of the camp**

And Moshe would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, far away from the camp, and he called it the Tent of Meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought God went out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp. And it was, when Moshe went out to the Tent, that all the people rose up and stood every man at the entrance to his tent, and looked after Moshe until he had gone into the Tent. And it was, as Moshe entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the entrance of the Tent, and [God] spoke with Moshe. And all the people saw the pillar of cloud stand at the entrance to the Tent, and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man at the entrance to his tent. And God spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he turned back to the camp, but his servant, Yehoshua bin Nun, a young man, did not depart from inside the Tent. (*Shemot* 33:7-11)

In the midst of the "argument" between Moshe and God following the sin of the golden calf as to whether God Himself will accompany the people in their midst or whether He will send an angel in His stead, Moshe pitches his tent outside of the camp and calls it the Tent of Meeting. From this point onwards, distance will be replaced with closeness – perhaps the greatest closeness ever experienced between man and God. Moshe comes to the Tent, the pillar of cloud descends and stands at the entrance to the Tent, and immediately "God spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."

The removal of the tent outside of the camp and the intimate dialogue with Moshe tell several different stories. First, the people witness this intimate encounter between God and a human (as emphasized in the verses). In contrast to the giving of the first Tablets, where the encounter was accessible to all ("and all the people saw the thunder…"), now the equation is different: the encounter with God is a function of the individual's spiritual status. The nation as a whole is not worthy, and therefore the Tent of Meeting is pitched outside of the camp. Moshe himself is worthy, and therefore he merits a tremendous closeness to God. Moshe exemplifies and embodies the lesson that if the people will follow his example, they too will merit God's closeness.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**God comes to the camp**

*Parashat Pekudei* represents a turning point. In contrast to the Divine Presence that has appeared so far outside of the camp, in constant movement (the pillar of fire and of cloud take up positions in different places; the Tent that Moshe pitches outside of the camp) or only for a temporary time (upon the mountain), a *Mishkan* has now been built to be a permanent part of the camp, and God comes to invest it with His Presence:

So Moshe finished the work. And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*. And Moshe could not enter the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of God filled the *Mishkan*. And when the cloud was lifted from over the *Mishkan*, *Bnei Yisrael* proceeded in all their journeys. But if the cloud was not lifted, then they did not journey, until the day it was lifted. For the cloud of God was upon the *Mishkan* by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all of *Bnei Yisrael* throughout their journeys. (*Shemot* 40:33-38)

This is a most dramatic and radical change. God is no longer "there;" He is now "here,” present within the Israelite camp and part of it. As a first stage, His Presence fills the space, not allowing Moshe to enter;[[8]](#footnote-8) later, the Tent of Meeting will serve as the place of encounter between God and man.

Interestingly, *Sefer Vayikra* ignores the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire altogether. The obvious reason for this is that *Sefer Vayikra* reflects the perspective of the "Higher authority."[[9]](#footnote-9) The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire embody the inverse movement, whereby God comes to dwell within the human domain, within the camp itself. This is a reality that does not exist in *Sefer Vayikra*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Sefer Bamidbar* describes the camp and what goes on within it, and in this context, the pillar of cloud and of fire take up their positions once again:

And on the day that the *Mishkan* was set up, the cloud covered the *Mishkan* – the Tent of Testimony – and at evening there was upon the *Mishkan* an appearance as of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And when the cloud was lifted from the *Mishkan*, then afterwards *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed, and in the place where the cloud rested, there *Bnei Yisrael* encamped. At God's command *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed, and at God's command they encamped; so long as the cloud rested upon the *Mishkan*, they remained encamped. And when the cloud tarried for many days upon the *Mishkan*, then *Bnei Yisrael* kept God's charge and did not journey. And at times the cloud was just a few days upon the *Mishkan* – at God's command they remained encamped, and at God's command they journeyed. And at times the cloud was only from evening until morning, and in the morning the cloud was lifted – then they journeyed; whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was lifted, they journeyed. Or whether it was two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the *Mishkan*, resting upon it – *Bnei Yisrael* remained encamped and did not journey, but when it was lifted up, they journeyed. At God's command they remained encamped, and at God's command they journeyed; they kept God's charge, at God's command by the hand of Moshe. (*Bamidbar* 9:15-23)

These verses describe God's Presence in the *Mishkan*. Following the many chapters describing the structure of the camp, the location of each tribe, and the *Mishkan* at the center, the description of the cloud resting upon the camp may be understood as an indication of God's Presence having moved to the heart of the Israelite camp. "At God's word *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed, and at God's word they encamped" – this is not a reference to a pillar of cloud or a pillar of fire proceeding before the camp. Now their movement is dependent on the behavior of the pillar that dwells in the very heart of the camp itself, in the innermost center of their national life. The detailed description in the verses illustrates the complete dependence of the people on the guidance of God, Who is present within the camp. To illustrate: a journey might conclude in the evening, and the people have no way of knowing what will happen the next morning. Even if they remain at this station for weeks or months, the question arises each day anew: are we traveling or remaining encamped? This situation entails a certain psychological and spiritual position, somewhat like that of a young child whose parents determine his daily agenda, thereby creating "parental presence" in his awareness, his decision-making, and his system of values.

The climax of God's Presence in the heart of the camp would seem to be found in the following description:

They journeyed from the mountain of God three days' journey, with the Ark of God's Covenant journeying before them in the three days' journey, to search out a resting place for them. And God's cloud was upon them by day, when they went out of the camp. And it was, when the Ark moved on, that Moshe said, “Rise up, O God, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.” And when it rested he said, “Return, O God, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel." (*Bamidbar* 10:33-36)

These verses conclude a long series of chapters (starting at the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*) that describe the Israelite camp and all its parts. Now, following all the preparations, the nation sets out on its journey in the wilderness. Along with the description of the journeying nation, the text also describes the "Ark of God's Covenant journeying,” locating it, as it were, in the midst of the camp. The journey is accompanied by God's cloud: "And God's cloud was upon them by day, when they went out of the camp." This centrality of God's Presence and of holiness is the result of a lengthy process, over the course of which, step by step, the Divine Presence has become an inner, significant aspect of the life of the nation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**In times of crisis**

Another axis that we find in *Sefer Bamidbar* is God's appearance and His repeated intervention in times of crisis. This occurs in the episode of the "complainers,” when God's fire burns amongst the people (*Bamidbar* 11:1); in the wake of the desire for meat, when God descends in a cloud and in His Presence some of the spirit that Moshe possesses is conveyed to the seventy elders (11:24-25); in the wake of Miriam's speaking about Moshe (12:4-9); following the sin of the spies (14:10-12); in the episode of Korach and his company (16:19-21) and afterwards (17:6-10); and at Mei Meriva (20:6-8). In each instance, God's glory appears, in some cases in a cloud, and He has His say.

The earlier crises take place during the second year after the Exodus, while the last takes place in the fortieth year. In the earlier crises, God reveals Himself to the entire nation or to the people involved in the situation. In the last instance, at Mei Meriva, He is revealed to Moshe and Aharon, but not the rest of the people, who pursue them to the Tent of Meeting. From this point onwards, no further mention is made of the cloud and the fire, even in contexts where we would expect to find them.[[12]](#footnote-12) They are almost altogether absent from *Sefer* *Devarim*, as well,[[13]](#footnote-13) and they do not appear again until Shlomo completes the building of the Temple:

And it was, when the *kohanim* came out of the *Kodesh*, that the cloud filled God's House, so that the *kohanim* could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of God had filled God's House.

Then Shlomo said, “God said that He would dwell in the thick darkness. I have surely built You a House to dwell in, a settled place for You to abide in forever." (*Melakhim* *I* 8:10-13).

There is no further mention of the cloud and fire throughout the First Temple Period, but we encounter them once more in the descriptions of the Destruction.[[14]](#footnote-14)

What is the meaning of this?

There seem to be two parallel processes. The first is one of creating connection. The Divine Presence signifies, for the people, God's existence – first outside of the camp, and then gradually drawing closer and more intensive. Interaction is created, the intensity grows, and in the course of a process whose essence is the creation of trust, God comes from the mountain into the midst of the camp, into the *Mishkan*. Correspondingly, God is first perceived as outside of man, and slowly He draws closer and becomes part of his life. The *Mishkan* is located at the heart of the camp, and the Presence settles in this innermost place as though conveying a message to the people about its own essence and depth. This is the situation during the early period following the Exodus from Egypt.

Then the nation matures, and slowly there develops another inner movement – one of independent existence and essence. "At God's word they journeyed and at God's word they encamped" is a very lofty situation, a very strong "parental Presence" on God's part, bringing the nation to great spiritual heights. At the same time, however, there is a noticeable lack of choice, planning, assumption of responsibility, and other values arising from one's personal world and adaptation to it.

*Sefer Shemot* concludes with a description of Moshe, who is unable to enter the Tent of Meeting: "And Moshe could not come into the Tent of Meeting for the cloud rested upon it." To a considerable extent, this represents the tension between the two poles: it serves as a point of climax for a *sefer* that starts off with *Am Yisrael* leaving Egypt, continues with the Revelation at Mount Sinai, and then describes the process of building a dwelling for God in the midst of the camp. At the other pole, there is the cloud that rests in the *Mishkan*, not allowing Moshe to enter.[[15]](#footnote-15) In such a situation, no encounter between God and man will take place.

In order for an encounter to happen, there must appear another inner movement – that of making space. This movement finds expression in a verse close by: "And when the cloud was lifted from over the *Mishkan*, *Bnei Yisrael* proceeded in all their journeys." When the cloud lifts, making space, *Bnei Yisrael* set out on their journeys in a movement from one place to another. At the same time, "But if the cloud was not lifted, then they did not journey, until the day it was lifted." They are dependent on its presence, projected from it.

The idea of "making space" represents the core of the great process, the larger picture, over the course of which the pillar of fire and pillar of cloud are gradually removed.

Within the heart of the *Kodesh Kodashim*, there remains the fire, as well as the cloud. When the Temple is destroyed, they emerge from their concealment. When it is rebuilt, they will be remembered and will live on, representing a whole world.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The biblical language refers to a "*shokhen*" (literally, "dweller"), in the masculine, rather than "*shekhina*" – the feminine term more familiar to us in this context, but one that appears for the first time only during the Second Temple Period. This transition from the masculine term to the feminine counterpart reflects a fundamental change in the world – from prophecy that perceives the word of a transcendent God to an Oral Law that embodies, to a considerable extent, the encounter with God in the depths of the reality of life. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In contrast to worldviews whose adherence to abstraction distanced any possibility of a living encounter between man and God, the biblical solution to this paradox draws a distinction between the aspect of God as Creator of the world and the aspect of God as immanent in the world. A division of this sort lies at the foundation of the first two chapters of *Sefer Bereishit*. In the first chapter, we encounter God Who brings the world into existence through His speech; this is a transcendental God. In this chapter, the verbs accompanying God's action are "*va-yomer*" ([God] said), "*va-yivra*" ([God] created), "*va-yavdel*" ([God] separated), etc. – actions that require no involvement or presence. In chapter 2, God is depicted as immanent in the world, as dwelling within it and acting through worldly vessels: "And no plant of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet grown, for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground… And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (*Bereishit* 2). God is depicted as being present in the Garden of Eden, as waiting to bring down rain, as breathing life into man, and as planting trees in the Garden. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the present, we will ignore the appearance of the cloud and fire in *Sefer Bereishit* at the revelation of the Covenant Between the Parts: "And it happened that when the sun went down and it was dark, behold – a smoking furnace and a burning torch that passed between those pieces" (*Bereishit* 15:17). Another early appearance is at the burning bush, where there is a fire that burns within a thorn bush. No special imagination is necessary to recognize the connection between the nature of this revelation and the weak bond that *Am Yisrael*, groaning under the burden of Egyptian slavery, feels towards God. *Chazal* express this in different ways in the *midrashim*: "R. Eliezer said: For what reason did the Holy One, blessed be He, emerge from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the bush? To teach that just as this bush is lower than any type of tree in the world, so *Bnei Yisrael* had sunk to the lowest level. God descended with them and redeemed them, as it is written: 'I shall go down and save them from the hand of Egypt.' R. Yehoshua said: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, emerge from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the bush? To teach that when *Bnei Yisrael* went down to Egypt, the Divine Presence went down together with them, as it is written: 'I shall go down with you…' (*Bereishit* 46:4)" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 3:7-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ramban (on *Shemot* 13:21): "'And God went before them by day' – Our Sages already taught (*Bereishit Rabba* 51:2) that wherever the Torah says 'And God,' it means 'He and His heavenly court.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, was with them by day, and His heavenly court was with them by night. This being so, what the verse means is that God dwells within the cloud and He Himself goes before them by day in the pillar of cloud, while at night His heavenly court dwells within the pillar of fire to give them light. This in turn explains the verse, 'You, Lord, are seen with their own eyes, and Your cloud stands over them, and You go before them by day in a pillar of cloud and in a pillar of fire by night’ (*Bamidbar* 14:14)." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An interesting view is offered by R. Yosef in the *gemara* (*Kiddushin* 32a): "R. Matena said in the name of R. Chisda: If a father foregoes his honor, his honor is foregone; if a teacher foregoes his honor, his honor is not foregone. But R. Yosef said: Even a teacher – if he foregoes his honor, his honor is foregone, as it is written, 'And God went before them by day' (*Shemot* 13:21)." The point of departure for the discussion is that a teacher cannot forego the honor due to him because the honor due to him is honor of the Torah, and the honor of Torah is the honor of God. R. Yosef agrees with this premise, but he argues that just as God Himself foregoes His own honor, a human teacher may similarly forego the same honor. As proof of God foregoing His honor, he cites our verse – "And God went before them by day” – which he understands as depicting God humbly serving His people. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See our *shiur* of this year on *Parashat Beshalach*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The location of the pillar of cloud at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting seems to indicate a complexity: On the one hand, there is the encounter that takes place within the Tent, within the private domain where Moshe is. On the other hand, God's Presence remains, as it were, at the entrance to the Tent, not entering it, and thereby drawing Moshe to the world that lies beyond what happens within his own domain. In this sense, the contrast with Yehoshua, who is also mentioned here, has two elements to it: Yehoshua is inside the Tent, and not part of the encounter with God Who is present at its entrance. At the same time, Yehoshua does not leave the Tent – in contrast to Moshe, who comes and goes from the camp of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A similar phenomenon occurs when the Ark is brought to the *Kodesh Kodashim* in the Temple built by King Shlomo: "And the *kohanim* brought the Ark of God's Covenant into its place, into the Sanctuary of the House, to the *kodesh* *kodashim*, beneath the wings of the *keruvim*… And it was, when the *kohanim* came out of the *Kodesh*, that the cloud filled God's House, so that the *kohanim* could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of God had filled God's House" (*Melakhim* *I* 8:6, 10-11). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See our *shiur* on *Parashat Vayakhel*, n. 6. There are other expressions of the same idea: The service in the *Mishkan* is described as presence before God: "The elders of the congregation shall lay their hands upon the head of the bullock before God, and the bullock shall be killed before God" (*Vayikra* 4:15). In this space, any service that has not been commanded is defined as foreign: "And Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, took each man his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before God, which He had not commanded them. And a fire emerged from before God and consumed them, and they died before God" (*Vayikra* 10:1-2). This also explains Aharon's words, indicating the space as being "before God": "And Aharon said to Moshe, Behold, today they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before God, but such things have befallen me that if I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been accepted in the sight of God?" (*Vayikra* 10:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There is no mention of the fire or the cloud in *Sefer Vayikra*, but at the same time, God is perceived as being present in the Tent of Meeting, which itself is regarded as a Higher domain: "God called to Moshe and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying" (*Vayikra* 1:1). It is interesting to note the distinction between this first call, in which the syntax of the verse avoids God as the subject (literally, the verse reads, "He called to Moshe, and God spoke to him…"), and the speech is attributed to God by Name thereafter ("God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting"). We might explain this as follows: Moshe is outside of the Tent of Meeting, and from this position, the encounter with God is "external". Only after he answers God's call can the encounter become a more internal one, in which God is mentioned by Name.

    It is also interesting to note the expression "for I appear in the cloud above the covering", as we find in *Sefer Vayikra*: "God said to Moshe: Speak to Aharon, your brother, that he should not come at all times into the *Kodesh* within the veil, before the covering which is upon the Ark, so that he will not die, for I appear in the cloud upon the covering… And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before God, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten fine, and bring it inside the veil. And he shall place the incense upon the fire before God, so that the cloud of incense may cover the covering that is upon the Testimony, so that he does not die" (*Vayikra* 16:2-13). Following the death of Aharon's two sons, the *Kohen Gadol's* service of Yom Kippur is set forth, and it is stated explicitly that God "appears in the cloud." This time, His Presence comes in the form of the cloud of incense – the product of human action, resulting in the cloud over the covering, rather than the cloud in which God dwells. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The intimacy of God's Presence in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire is evidenced in Moshe's words, when he argues in defense of the people after the sin of the spies and mentions the pillar of cloud and of smoke, which are perceived as expressions of God's connection with and concern for His nation: "Moshe said to God, ‘But the Egyptians will hear (for You brought up this people in Your might from their midst), and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land, who have heard that You, God, are among this people, that you, God, are seen face to face, and that **Your cloud stands over them**, and that You go before them in a **pillar of cloud** by day, and in a **pillar of fire** by night. Now if You kill this entire people as one man, then the nations which have heard Your fame will speak, saying, ‘It is because God was not able to bring this people into the land which He swore to them, that He has slain them in the wilderness’" (*Bamidbar* 14:13-16). With these words, Moshe tries to persuade God not to annihilate His people. His argument is that the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the land have heard about God's closeness to His people, in the form of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. Now, if they hear that the nation has been wiped out, they will claim that it was because God was unable to bring them into the land that He had promised to them. The noting of the pillar of fire and of cloud is tantamount to mentioning God's closeness and concern for His people. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For instance, in the episode involving the women of Moav (*Bamidbar* 25:1-4) and in the episode concerning Zimri and Kozbi bat Tzur (25:5-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. They are mentioned as part of Moshe's historical review, but they make only one new appearance – when it comes time for Moshe to die and God speaks to him about what will happen: "God said to Moshe, ‘Behold, your days approach to die; call Yehoshua and present yourselves at the Tent of Meting, that I may command him.’ So Moshe went with Yehoshua, and they presented themselves at the Tent of Meeting. And God appeared in the Tent in the pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood over the entrance to the Tent. And God said to Moshe, ‘Behold, you will sleep with your fathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land, into the midst of which they will be going, and they will abandon Me and violate My covenant which I forged with them’" (*Devarim* 31:14-16). The return of the pillar of cloud would seem to express the special connection that this sort of revelation had with the period of Moshe's leadership of the people; it is as though they have come to accompany him prior to his death. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A description of their departure is to be found in *Sefer Yechezkel*: "And He spoke to the man clothed in linen, and said, ‘Go in between the wheelwork, under the *keruv*, and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the *keruvim*, and scatter them over the city.’ And he went in in my sight. Now the *keruvim* stood on the right side of the House when the man went in, and the cloud filled the inner court. Then God's glory went up from the *keruv* and stood above the threshold of the House, and the House was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of God's glory" (*Yechezkel* 10:2-4). The coals of fire are taken from between the *keruvim* – as though alluding to the fire that had been concealed there all along. The cloud, too, fills the House once more, as it did when God's Presence first entered it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A fascinating *midrash* presents these two contrasting poles: "R. Zerika asked a question concerning the contradiction of biblical verses in the presence of R. Elazar; according to another version, he asked the question in the name of R. Eliezer. One passage reads: 'And Moshe was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud rested upon it,' while a different verse reads, 'And Moshe came into the midst of [*betokh*] the cloud'. [How is this so?] This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, took hold of Moshe and brought him into the cloud. The school of R. Yishmael taught: Here we find the word *betokh* [in the midst] and elsewhere, too, we find it: 'And *Bnei Yisrael* went into the midst of [*betokh*] the sea'. Just as in the latter instance [the word *betokh*] implies a path, as it is written, 'And the waters were a wall for them', so here too there was a path, [for Moses through the cloud]." (*Yoma* 4b) R. Zerika (or R. Elazar) notes that the verse at the end of *Sefer Shemot* describes Moshe as unable to enter the Tent of Meeting because of the cloud, while elsewhere, in chapter 24, Moshe was described as entering into the midst of the cloud after the cloud had covered Mount Sinai. How is this possible? A first possible answer suggests that Moshe was unable to enter the cloud on Mount Sinai on his own, but he could do so with God's help ("This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, took hold of Moshe and brought him into the cloud"). A second answer depicts a path paved for Moshe, as it were, allowing him to enter the cloud. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)