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Study Text for “A Short Jewish Defense of Liberalism”
Temple Micah, Washington, DC
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Exodus 33:12-23

Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people.” And He said, “My presence shall go *with you*, and I will give you rest.” Then he said to Him, “If Your presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here. “For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the *other* people who are upon the face of the earth?” The ADONAI said to Moses, “I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name.”

Then Moses said, “I pray You, show me Your glory!” And He said, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the ADONAI before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.” But He said, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” Then ADONAI said, “Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand *there* on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. “Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen.”

Commentary 1.

Arnold Ehrlich, *Mikra Ki-Feshuto*, commentary to Exodus 33:23

“You shall see My back but My face shall not be seen.” If there is an esoteric meaning to this phrase, I am not privy to it, because I am not

part of the divine inner circle. What I see in it reflects the words of a German sage (Gotthold Lessing) who wrote the following: "Were I to have stood in the presence of God, whose right hand was holding Truth, and whose left hand was holding The Search for Truth, and were I to have been given the choice of one or the other, I would choose The Search for Truth." A similar thing was said in Mishnah Avot (4:22): "A single hour of repentance and good deeds in this world is more delightful than an entire lifetime in the World to Come." They said this because one who arrives at Truth, and thus to the life of the World to Come, is now at rest from all striving, having arrived at the desired destination; and when one works toward something of supreme value, the striving itself is a greater good than the reward yielded. It is just the same with the matter of knowing God and God's ways: were a person to be able to ascend to the highest rung bar none, what would that person do subsequently? Therefore, a human cannot see the face of God; only God's back is shown to the God fearing, so that they will study, search out, and infer things about God's face from that back. Thus they will strive all their days to know God with a full and clear knowledge, and that striving is their reward.

Commentary 2.

Michael Gelven, *Truth and Existence: A Philosophical Inquiry*

The story is deeply paradoxical. For if Lessing genuinely desires the truth, then is he not disingenuous in turning down the offer of truth itself? If I desire gold and someone offers me gold or a stake in a gold claim, I would take the gold. By denying God's offer of truth Lessing seems to be denying any meaningful sense of a search for truth. Why search for truth if, when offered it, one turns it down?

Yet this fable of Lessing's suggests a deeper insight than mere frustration with someone who does not know what he wants. **There is the suggestion in this little story that only an infinite being can possess truth**, and that to accept the right-handed offer is to forfeit one's humanity.