

Parashat Yitro 2026

Sinai and Psychedelics

One of my favorite hikes anywhere in the world is the hike to the top of Glacier Point from Yosemite Valley. I'm sure many of you have done it. For those who haven't, it rises nearly 3,500 feet over five miles. On the way up, as you zigzag through the switchbacks, you're treated to ascending views of Yosemite Falls across the valley and periodic glimpses of Half Dome. Once you crest the ridge line you reach a vista point that looks down on Vernal and Nevada falls. The views going up and at the top are simply spectacular.

It sometimes happens when I'm doing this hike during summer months that just as I reach the top and get to the vista point, a carload of people are unloading in the parking lot, having arrived by road from the other side. They get out of their car, coffee cups with morning brew and scones in hand, and join me as I look at the stunning views.

It takes me 3 1/2 to 4 hours to make it to the top. It took them about an hour to drive the 30 miles from the valley floor and around the back and up to the top. We stand next to each other, looking at the exact same scenery. My question is this: are we seeing the same thing? Are we having the same experience as we stand there?

I want this scene and these questions to frame today's drash on Sinai and psychedelics. What happens when we are given an experience we haven't had to work hard to attain, whether it be the Theophany at Mt. Sinai or the powerful mystical experiences that can be had from taking a tiny dose of LSD, eating some mushrooms, or drinking ayahuasca?

Let's begin with the theophany — a word which means “the appearance of God”, where all the Israelites at Mt. Sinai were witness to what might be the single most powerful experience of the divine in all of human history. There's thunder and lightening and fire and smoke and the blast of *shofarot*. It's described as the people “saw sounds” — an experience called “synesthesia” today. It means that our senses get mixed, so that we may taste colors or feel shapes. Synesthesia is often associated with powerful mystical experiences.

Recounting the theophany to the Israelites 40 years later in Deuteronomy , Moses tells them: פנים בפנים דיבר יהוה עמכם בהר מתוך האש /This is translated as “Face to face God spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire.” There’s a few issues with this statement and its translation. First off, God tells Moses “No one can see my face and live” so how did the Israelites see God face to face? Second, the Israelites are told to stay off the mountain — anyone who touches it will die, so again, how were they seeing God face to face? Third, if you want to say “face to face” in Hebrew, you say פנים אל פנים and this is the language that is used elsewhere throughout Torah.

So what’s going on here? The modern Chasidic book *Pnei HaShem* explains this as follows: we need to translate פנים בפנים hyperliterally as “face in face” God spoke to you. The author explains that the Hebrew word פנים is connected to the Hebrew word פנימיות, meaning “inner essence.” So at Sinai, God brought God’s inner essence into the Israelites’ inner essence, and the Israelite people — we — have forever been transformed by that meeting. In one famous story in the Talmud about this meeting God holds the mountain over the heads of the people, threatening them with death unless they agreed to accept the Torah. My teacher, Rabbi Tuvia Kaplan of Jerusalem, explains this as meaning that a direct revelation of God is so overpowering that we can’t help but accept it. He says that in Chassidut, there are two forms of revelation: from above to below, as happens happens during the Theophany, where God comes down to the people, and from below to above — the method of *tshuva*, where we reach up for God. From above to below is more pure and powerful, but less readily internalized. From below to above takes longer, is harder, but because of that we own it more.

I think this truth is borne out by what happens some time later, in the incident of the golden calf. Moses disappears up the mountain and the people, without physical evidence of his presence to rely on, insist on making a physical idol to replace him. An entire nation which experienced miracle after miracle directly and the Theophany at Sinai regresses quickly to idolatry when they’re no longer being spoon fed miracles.

Some of you know that I am very interested professionally and personally in psychedelics. The “psychedelic renaissance”, as it’s been called, has allowed me to step out of my psychedelic closet and speak more openly about them. Psychedelics are an example of from above to below

revelation, where we don't have to do much work to be given very powerful experiences. To illustrate this, I want to recount one of the stronger psychedelic experiences of my life that happened about a year and a half ago.

I was at a four-day men's medicine retreat. It was a very well run affair — the ideal set and setting for psychedelic medicine. The men were all conscious, mature and intentional, the leader a gifted shaman. The culmination of the weekend came our third evening, on Saturday night, and the most powerful part of that ceremony for me was — not with shofarot, which no one brought, but someone did bring a didgeridoo.

For those of you not familiar, a didgeridoo is a long wind instrument used by the Aboriginal people of Australia. It's made from a piece of wood about 4' long that has been hollowed out by termites. It creates a deep, deep sound that sounds like the primordial heartbeat of the universe. In my altered state, I sat down directly in front of the man playing it, sometimes putting my ear right to the opening at the other end. I went almost completely out of my mind, in the best sense of the word. That is, I felt safe enough to let go of control at deeper and deeper levels, and went to some of the farthest reaches I've ever traveled with psychedelics. At one point the man playing had disappeared totally and there was in his place a black, disembodied head playing the instrument. After the fact I made sense of that as an embodiment of the aboriginal spirit that was playing through him and filling the room. It was a very transformative, moving experience co-created with a group of men who felt to me like brothers, and a leader I trusted.

Now comes the punch line.

As the ceremony wound down around 1 a.m., we retired to the kitchen where a man who was part of our group but also hired to feed us had prepared soup for us. I ate my fill and then asked him if he needed help in the kitchen. He looked at me with a look of relief and said "Please."

So I started to help him clean up and then asked him "Aren't there some guys who are supposed to be helping you?" I knew some of the men were on work study — they had received a discount and were supposed to help in the kitchen in return. He shrugged, as if to say "that's human nature."

I started feeling myself getting angrier and angrier, both on his behalf, and frankly, on my own. I wanted to be sitting down with the guys, debriefing from the evening, sharing in the jokes and camaraderie. But I couldn't abandon this dear man who needed help. I remember clearing the tables, as the men who I had just shared such a powerful weekend with passed me their dirty dishes without looking up from their conversation, and asking myself "When and how did I become the hired help?"

This I think embodies the trouble with above to below revelation, both with the men and within me. They seemed perfectly happy to let themselves be served even though we were all in this together. And I completely lost the oneness and unity I had felt not one hour earlier. So did I really get nothing from that powerful experience with the didgeridoo? Does it mean anything if I turn into a judgmental, angry person an hour later?

When Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai and sees the idolatry, he too loses his temper and he breaks the tablets God has written the 10 commandments on. He has to go back up the mountain and write the new tablets himself, at God's instruction. I think these two sets of tablets, those given to us by God and those Moses wrote, are analogous to from above to below and from below to above, of being gifted and of working for our keep. There is an abundance of gifts we seldom stop to appreciate until they're threatened, whether it is each breath we take, our health, or winning the genetic lottery in where we're born. Privilege alone means nothing — it's what we do with our privilege. I can certainly attest that no one becomes enlightened simply by taking psychedelics, no matter how enlightening the experiences themselves are. It requires a lot of hard work to integrate the gifts of psychedelics, to make them our own. I think one of Judaism's gifts to humanity in general and to the psychedelic community in particular is that the whole point of the ascent is the descent afterwards — what do you do with and how do you integrate transcendence into every day life.

Shabbat shalom.