

**AFC Faith Leaders Meeting
Closing Comments
May 20, 2009
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During his second stay on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32-34), Moses asks for a full disclosure of God's Glory, or Presence. He is told that this is impossible; no human can realize this goal. While humans can recognize God's Graciousness, they are told, "You cannot see My face, for humans cannot see Me and live..." Moses is assured by God, "You will see My back, but My face will not be seen..."

The biblical text continues some verses later with God's presence passing before Moses, and proclaiming the *midot*, or divine attributes of God:

Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun...The Lord, Adonai is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation...

Tradition teaches that even the highest spiritual moment, such as that which Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai, does not lead to absolute knowledge of God. While an encounter with the Divine is overwhelming and convincing, it cannot not yield a full and complete description of God, that any attempt to know God fully remains necessarily incomplete. Indeed, even during our most inspired moments we, like Moses, see only God's back, but not God's face.

Yet, the verses which follow suggest that while we may not be allowed to perceive God's essence in its totality, we may perceive God's attributes, God's values, God's moral qualities, if you will – his kindness, his mercy, compassion and goodness.

Indeed, in a later interpretation, the rabbis suggest that Genesis' description of Abraham walking in God's ways is telling us that Abraham lived his life by the very attributes of God which were revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai: mercy, goodness, kindness and compassion, suggesting that God's goodness can be realized on this earth through the moral character of our interactions with one another.

Yet, as we strive to incorporate our particular faith's understanding of God's values into daily living, this teaching reminds us that the mysterious and infinite God can never be fully comprehended; that like Moses on Mt. Sinai, we can never fully see God's face. That we possess, even in the fullness of our own faiths, only an aspect of the truth – and not the whole truth.

Today, we have shared stories from our respective traditions, and we have opened the gates of goodness and compassion. Sharing together, we have seen an aspect of God. In so doing, we have opened ourselves to the possibility that the spiritual experiences of others may enhance our own faith, and allow us to see another aspect of the infinite God, which before today we may not have known.

We in the Alabama Faith Council treat seriously the strength and beauty of our diverse faith traditions. Yet the story from Exodus suggests that while we are entitled to joyously proclaim our faith from the rooftops and celebrate with joyous devotion, each of our traditions remains only a partial glimpse of the Infinite.

In this spirit, we pray that we may leave our gathering today with a better understanding that wherever we find graciousness and compassion we are encountering the Presence of God, even if it be outside our own community. And as we return to our own communities, may we continue to leave room for other perspectives, and to learn from them.

May we continue to grow in our understanding that while each of us possesses an aspect of the truth, we may not possess the whole truth, and may we therefore leave space in our hearts for God's mysterious majesty to express itself in ever new and unexpected ways.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain is an Orthodox Jew, some might say a fundamentalist. He is also one of the great forward thinkers of age on issues of diversity and social justice. In closing, I would like to offer a brief excerpt from his book, The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations:

“The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his. Can Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Confucians, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants make space for one another....? Can we create a paradigm shift through which we come to recognize that we are enlarged, not diminished, by difference...?”