

*Dr. Eliezer Berkovits, "The Paradox of the Encounter" in God, Man and History (1965)*

"God's presence seems to be threatening; it imperils the life of the person to whom it wishes to communicate itself... Standing at the mountain of Sinai, the children of Israel trembled with fear at the voice of God, which yet was conferring on them their greatest distinction... The peril that emanates from "contact" with the Divine Presence, has nothing to do either with the sinfulness of man or with the judgement of the Almighty. It is something quite "natural", almost "physical", if one may say so. A man wilts in the heat of the midday sun, or dies of exhaustion if he is exposed too long to cold weather. Often mere lightning and thunder or the tempest of the elements frighten him. How, then, dare he hope to stand in the presence of the ultimate source of all energy and all power in the cosmos; how dare he approach it and survive!... Thus we are faced with a strange paradox. The God of religion, we have found must be a living one. And a living God is one who stands in relationship to the world, i.e., a God who not only is but is also for man, as it were, who is concerned about man... Now we find that the encounter threatens the very existence of man.., there can be no religion without some active relationship between man and God; in the relationship, however, man cannot survive.

The paradox is resolved by God, when He "shows" Himself to man. God, who reveals His "unbearable" Presence to the helpless creature, also sustains man in the act of revelation... Man is threatened and affirmed at the same time. Through the peril that confronts him, he is bound to recognize his nothingness before God; yet, in the divine affirmation, the highest conceivable dignity is bestowed upon him: he is allowed into fellowship with God... The dual nature of man, which emerges in the basic religious experience, found its classical formulation in the words of the Psalmist, when he explained: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou thinkest of him? Yet Thou hast made him but lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor." Man, who is "dust and ashes" and is yet "crowned with glory and honor" is the corollary to God, whose throne is the heaven and footstool is the earth and who yet looks on him who is "poor and of a contrite spirit"... Through the encounter Judaism first learned of God, who is almighty and yet cares for man, Supreme Lord and yet a friend."