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“Panim” and “Achor”

We have so far explained three ways how a person sees something (and a fourth way which is more subtle). There is the higher *Chochmah*, which is when one makes use of his intellect’s vision. There is *Tevunah*, which is to see based upon comparisons. Then there is the lower *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*, which are both physical ways we see with our eyes.

To understand more what our mental vision is, we can find the root of this in the Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem, *“Show me Your glory.”* Hashem responded, *“You can see My back, but My face you shall not see.”*^m

This shows us that there are different levels of how we can see. One kind of viewpoint is *panim* (“face”), in which we see directly. This is when we see the actual wisdom as it is – we see its “face”. The other kind of viewpoint is *achor* (“back”), which is to see only the “back” of the wisdom.

It is upon us to understand what *panim* is, and what *achor* is.

To give a superficial definition, *panim* is when one sees the wisdom in a more revealed way, while *achor* is to only see the outer layer of the wisdom.

In different terms, though, *panim* is the essence of the wisdom, while *achor* is only to see something in terms of how it relates to something else. *Achor* has the same letters as the word *acher* (“other”); this shows us that when a person sees only through *achor*, he only sees it in terms of “others” – he doesn’t see what it actually is, but he just sees how it would appear to others.

When a person sees through *achor*, it's not about what he's seeing – it's about the one seeing it. He sees something, but instead of seeing the actual thing, he sees himself in it. By contrast, when a person sees through *panim*, he sees the essence of what he's looking at.

A person naturally grows up seeing through *achor*, and he never sees the essence of something. In other words, usually when a person sees something, he doesn't really see it! He sees himself in something – he sees his own reflection in everything he sees, but he never actually sees what is really in front of him.

Three Kinds of Viewpoints

There are altogether three different kinds of mental vision: *panim b'panim*, "seeing face-to-face"; *panim b'achor*, "seeing the face from the back"; and *achor b'achor*, "seeing the back from the back."

When a person sees *panim b'panim*, he sees "face to face". In other words, he sees the actual essence of the person or whatever he is looking at. This is the highest kind of vision, and it resembles what is written, "*Face to face Hashem spoke with them.*"

The middle level is *panim b'achor*, which is an indirect kind of vision. This is to see another person or another thing as your own reflection; here, you are seeing yourself in someone else. That is why it is called *panim b'achor*, because you are seeing your face in another person's back. Sometimes a person isn't aware of himself so well, but from seeing another person's personality, he is able to recognize himself better. This kind of seeing yourself in someone else is *panim b'achor*.

The lowest kind of vision is *achor b'achor*, in which a person sees neither himself, nor the other person – his whole vision here is based upon how others are seeing. Here, he is only thinking about what others are thinking about him.

Panim b'panim is that when I look at someone, I see his actual essence. *Panim b'achor* is when I use someone else as a mirror of who I am. (A simple example of this is a mirror, which shows a person his reflection. When a person looks in a mirror, he doesn't see the mirror – he sees himself). *Achor b'achor* is when a person sees in a totally superficial way – when he looks at someone and only sees the superficial layer of the person. *Achor b'achor* also can mean "another in another" – it is just "another" person seeing "another" person. The person here isn't seeing the other person or even

himself in the other person.

Achor b'achor is really just imagination – it is nothing substantial. When I think about what another thinks about me, or when I think that another person is thinking like how I think of him – such kinds of thoughts are all in my imagination.

If I think what another is actually thinking about me, then I am thinking about something that is real. But if I think what another is thinking about simply because I am thinking about him, this isn't real – it is purely being imagined.

Two Levels of Chochmah and Tevunah

There is also a deeper way of describing these concepts.

The highest kind of mental vision, *panim b'panim*, is really another way of describing higher *Chochmah* and higher *Binah*. The middle level, *panim b'achor*, uses the higher *Chochmah* and the higher *Tevunah*. The lowest level, *achor b'achor*, uses the lower *Chochmah* and lower *Tevunah*, which is really imagination.

These are accepted facts, but we must clarify them to ourselves.

Chochmah and *Binah* is that a person really sees what the other person truly is. It is to see the reality of another person. This is essentially *panim b'panim*. Here, a person absorbs what his teacher really said, as it is. The *Chochmah* is to see the actual general information, while the *Binah* is to see the actual details; both are seeing the information as it is. All the details are really hidden in the *Chochmah* – and all of the *Chochmah* is hidden as well in all the details. This is *panim b'panim* – that all of the actual information of the *Chochmah* is revealed through the information of the *Binah*, and vice versa. All of the information is contained through either one of them.

Although the information is revealed differently depending on if it is *Chochmah* or *Binah*, still, all of the information is all here, and each of them reveals what is really in the other.

But with *panim b'achor*, a person doesn't see the other person in front of him; he sees himself in the person. Although he isn't really seeing the other person, at least he is clearly seeing his own reflection in the other person, so he is still seeing something substantial. He gets to understand himself better when he sees himself in another person.

Panim b'achor uses the higher *Chochmah* and higher *Tevunah*. The *Chochmah* here is the actual information that one received from his teacher, but the *Tevunah* here is just to compare information. When a person compares information, he uses his memory to remember well what his teacher said, but he's revealing the information based upon his own understanding, not upon the actual understanding of his teacher.

That is *panim b'achor*, the middle level. Here, the person doesn't see the actual information his teacher gave over – he only sees the “back” of the wisdom here, not the “face” of the wisdom.

But *achor b'achor* uses the lower kinds of *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*. Here the person doesn't even see at all what his teacher said – he only sees what is being produced from the information. He deduces information from which his teacher taught, or he sees something his teacher did and makes certain conclusions from this. He's not really using real thought here – he's just copying pictures into his head.

The person here doesn't understand what his teacher did. Even if he does what his teacher did, he is just copying him. He is not being himself.

With *panim b'achor*, a person at least reveals what he has received from his teachers. He might be off, but at least he has understood his teacher on his own level. But with *achor b'achor*, a person is totally off. He does not understand at all what his teacher has taught or done, and he is just imitating him.

When a person copies someone else's act, there is a way to do it sensibly. This is if he realizes the thoughts that are behind the action, and he uses his intellect to compare the facts. This is the higher kind of *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* which we addresses earlier.

But when a person just compares actions alone, and thus he just copies whatever his teacher did, he's not acting like his teacher and neither is he acting like himself. He is essentially doing new things which his teacher never did. This is the very source of a person's downfall – when he makes things up.

Of course, it's definitely better for a person to try to learn from his teacher's actions than from his own actions, but we cannot remain at that level.

So far, we have given a general definition of these concepts.

The True Way to See is to Know that

You Cannot See the End

Now we will try to explain how all of this applies to our soul.

When it comes to the physical, this is a clearly understood: seeing someone from behind is not the same as seeing someone face-to-face. But in our own soul, we must try to understand what it means to see directly, *panim*, and what it means to see indirectly - *achor*.

Panim, "face", can also mean to turn to someone (*poneh*). The face of the information shows where the information is turning to, where it is going. *Achor*, by contrast, is to go away from something.

How can a person see the *panim* of something? This is for a person to understand that he can only see the beginning of something, and that we cannot see the end. When a person thinks he has the complete understanding of something, he is only focused on the back of the information, not on the beginning of the information. He is only seeing through *achor*, not *panim*. Sometimes a person really does get to the end of a matter, and this is a refined kind of *achor*. But when a person thinks he understands something in its entirety and really he doesn't, he is seeing through an inaccurate lens - *achor*.

On a very subtle note, we must see how everything is endless, because everything is really connected to Hashem, who is endless. So really, *achor* is always an inaccurate way to see. This is the depth of what it means to see "*panim b'panim*" - face to face.

The beginning of any information shows where the information is leading to. A beginning by definition is something which connotes continuation. By contrast, *achor* is to see how the information has ended. And end is something by its very definition has no continuation.

In terms of our mind's vision, *achor* is to think that we have reached the end of understanding something, while *panim* is to see where the knowledge is leading up to.

For example, when a person is learning a *sugya*, there are different things going on his mind. If he is learning it the whole time because he wants to get down to the *halacha* that comes out of the *sugya*, and when he finally gets there he thinks that now he has understood the *sugya* - he is only seeing the *achor* of the wisdom, because he thinks he has reached the end. But if a person begins to learn the *sugya* and he thinks where he is going with this, he is seeing the *panim* of the wisdom.

This is a brief and simple definition of *panim* and *achor*.

Applying This To Learning Torah

Let us see how this concept applies to learning, which is our discussion – the power of wisdom and thought in a person.

When a person learns Torah, he has a certain picture in his mind about what he's learning. If he thinks that he's at the end of understanding it, this is *achor*. When a person understands that with each time he learns he discovers something new, this is *panim*.

Let us sharpen this discussion a bit more. *Achor b'achor* is the lowest way to see, because the person isn't seeing what's really in front of him, nor is he even seeing himself in it. When it comes to learning Torah, there is also *achor b'achor*. This can be, for example, if a person learns a few *Halachos* pertaining to a certain area, and then attempts to arrive at the conclusions. If it's written in the *sefer*, he does it.

A higher way to see than this is *panim b'achor*. With *panim b'achor*, a person sees only himself in the information – so what happens from this? He thinks that only his understanding is the way to understand something. He only sees how he is reflected in the information, so only his understanding is correct – according to his thinking. Such a person learns the *sugya* of Gemara in front of him and makes everything fit into how he understands it, and he limits his understanding by doing so.

It could be that he really is right in the way he understands it. But what is wrong here is that he thinks that only his understanding is the right one. Such an attitude is incorrect, because Chazal say that "Just as all faces are not the same, so is every opinion not the same." There are many ways to understand a *sugya* – there is no one way that is the only way.

The highest way to see is *panim b'panim*. Such a person knows that the way he understands something is only one of the possible ways to understand it, and he realizes that others have their own way of understanding.

Panim B'panim - Chochmah and Binah

Before we discussed *Chochmah* and *Binah*; we have said that *Chochmah* and *Binah* can see everything. The difference between them is that *Chochmah* is to see the information in general terms, while *Binah* is to see it all as detail after detail.

With lower *Tevunah*, a person only sees the details and doesn't connect them. *Binah* is that a person is aware that all the details eventually add up to something and reveal the actual wisdom. *Binah* is thus essentially *panim b'panim*.

The *Chochmah* sees all the information at once. This is the perfected state that a human being can reach; Adam was able to see everything all at once, before the sin. What does this mean? How do you see everything all at once? It is because he saw how everything connects into one picture. This is the perfected level of *Chochmah*.

With *Binah*, a person sees detail upon detail. He sees how every detail is another facet that completes the picture.

In our own learning, we use *Chochmah* and *Binah* as follows.

Chochmah is when we see how every part of the Torah which we learn is all one face. It is to see many "faces" that are all really part of one face, because they all have one root. When a person perfects his *Chochmah*, he is able to see the big picture of it all.

Moshe Rabbeinu was shown every Torah thought that each Jew will formulate^[2]. The depth of this matter was that he saw the many faces of wisdom all connect to be one-faced.

Binah is when one sees details as they are, but he is aware that eventually they all add up to be one. He knows that what he sees is not the end, and that there are always new facets of wisdom being revealed with each piece of information he comes across.

The world was created with "Fifty Gates of Understanding." Our *sefarim hakedoshim* explain that when we reach the fiftieth gate, we begin again from the forty-nine gates; this cycle keeps being repeated. The depth of this matter is that we never get to the end - we are instead always revealing greater depth each time to what he had previously.

Chochmah and *Binah* are thus *panim b'panim*. *Chochmah* is to see the general information as a whole, while *Binah* is to see details. But even when a person only sees details, it is still *panim*

b'panim, because the person is able to keep revealing a new face to the information each time. On a more subtle note, a person is able to reveal a whole new depth each time to the old information.

Panim B'achor - Chochmah and Tevunah

By contrast, the lower *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* is like *panim b'achor*.

Panim b'achor uses lower *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*. *Tevunah* doesn't show a person the essence of a matter that he has received from his teacher. *Chochmah* can show a person everything, because it is the actual wisdom that has been imparted from the teacher. The teacher has all the correct information, but the teacher also is aware that his student isn't really receiving what he is saying – he is receiving what he has heard.

The student thinks that he has gotten what his teacher said, and that he has gotten to the depth of what he has heard. In doing so, he is really taking his teacher's information and limiting it to his own understanding.

This is *panim b'achor*. The teacher is revealing the face of the wisdom, but the student only sees the back of it. In other words, the student thinks that he has arrived at the end of the understanding. The teacher is giving it over through *panim*, but the student is receiving the wisdom only through *achor*.

Imagination Is The Incorrect Way To See

When a person only sees information through *achor*, it is basically imagination. Why?

Let's think about a simple example from the physical world. If Shimon sees Reuven in front of him, he doesn't have to imagine how Reuven looks, because he sees him up close. But if he only sees Reuven from behind, and he thinks to himself, "That is Reuven", he will naturally imagine how Reuven's face looks.

Whenever a person sees something indirectly and from behind it, he begins to imagine what it looks like. When a person imagines someone else's looks, is it the same as when you're actually seeing him face to face? It is not the same thing. It is not as accurate as seeing him for real.

When a person imagines how something or someone else looks (because he only sees from *achor*), there are two disadvantages. First of all, he limits his understanding to what he has imagined. Secondly – and this is a deeper problem – his whole understanding here is based on his imagination.

By contrast, when a person sees through *panim b'panim*, he really sees what he's looking at, so there is no need to imagine it. It is only when a person can't see something that he imagines it. I can't see it, but my imagination can give me some picture of it. If I do see it, I don't need to imagine it – I might need to remember it, but I don't need to imagine it.

When I see someone from behind, I am only seeing him indirectly. What I am seeing here is just what I am imagining.

Anytime we picture something in our minds, it's all imagination. Whatever we have never seen, we attempt to imagine what it must look like. Our whole understanding of such things is limited to what we imagine. Whenever a person sees something in an unclear way, he makes use of his imagination to try to picture what it looks like.

Our Goal is to Achieve the Clearest Viewpoint

During the day we see more, but by night where we can't really see, our imagination is more commonly in use. This is clear and well-known.

To give a simple example, we know that Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy was on a higher level than other prophets. Moshe saw through *panim*, while the other prophets only saw through *achor*, and they had to use their imagination in order to understand the vision.

When it comes to our relationship with Hashem, there is no one who has *panim b'panim* with Hashem. There is always some *achor* involved, because we can't actually picture Hashem. On a very subtle note, *achor* is preferred over *panim* when it comes to how we relate to Hashem, because we are not allowed to imagine what it's like to be face-to-face with Hashem; it is just that with *achor*, a person has to be cautious that he shouldn't imagine the *panim* of Hashem.

But we are discussing here how to understand our soul, not the deeper aspects of our relationship with Hashem. There are three levels which can be revealed in our soul, and we will now illustrate them in terms of teacher and student.

The lowest level is *achor b'achor*. Here, the student does not see his teacher or even himself in the knowledge being imparted; he is just seeing actions. Here, the student thinks that the knowledge is not being taught to me – my teacher is just telling me what “to do.” The teacher is well is imparting the knowledge not in order to teach the student, but simply to tell him what to do. The student sees what his teacher does and imitates him. The teacher and student aren't facing each other here – there is no *panim*, just *achor*. The problem here is with the teacher – the one giving over the knowledge.

Panim b'achor is when the teacher faces his student. He is giving over the knowledge to his student to teach him, but he knows that the student isn't really receiving the actual knowledge. He knows that the student is only hearing what he has understood on his own level. Here, the problem is with the student – the receiver.

Panim b'panim is when a person sees the actual information. With each additional facet of information he sees, he knows that it only leads to more. If a person merits this understanding, he becomes like a *maayan hamisgaber* (mighty wellspring), because each piece of knowledge to him is another face of many faces. May the Creator merit us to reach the level of *panim b'panim* – “Face to face Hashem spoke with them.”

[\[1\]](#) (Shemos 33: 18)

[\[2\]](#) Vayikra Rabbah 22:1

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/getting-know-your-thoughts-011-mental-vision>