The quest for knowledge

This week's portion is a special one for the week of Pessah. After hearing a plea from Moses on behalf of the Israelites, God decides to forgive the sin of the golden calf, and assures Moses that God's presence will accompany them in their trek across the desert. But Moses is not satisfied. He wants more. The Torah says:

And Moses said to God: I beg you, if I have found favor in your sight, show me now your way, that I may know you...Show me your glory...
And God said, I will make all my goodness pass before you, I will proclaim My name before you; and I will be gracious and show mercy to whom I please...
But You may not see my face; for no man shall see me and live...
You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. [Ex 13-23]

Why not? What are we talking about here? First, does God have a face? That's not a Jewish concept. Even if so, is this face so terrifying that people die just from looking at it? Does it radiate so much light that people go blind and die when they see it? Surely not. There must be a figurative meaning here. Is the resulting "death" a punishment? Or an automatic consequence? Or a self-fulfilling prophecy?

I believe Moses is puzzled by this deity he cannot comprehend. He wants answers to ultimate questions. What is God's plan? What are God's motives? Why does evil exist? Moses wants knowledge. But God does not want to reveal this knowledge. God said he would drop hints - his "presence", his "goodness", his "back" - but God will not give straight answers.

A similar theme is picked up in the Book of Job. Job criticizes God for all the undeserved catastrophes showered on Job, and asks the same questions. God answers the questions with questions, in an extraordinary passage taking up 103 verses (Job 38-40). God's questions merely expose Job's ignorance of God's plans, but provide no answers:
God answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: 38:1
Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? 38:4
Tell me, if you know, who determined its boundaries? 38:5
What were those foundations attached to? 38:6
Do you know what happens after death? 38:17
Did you go inside the earth? Tell me, if you know it all. 38:18
Come on, you are old enough to know. 38:21
Where does the rain come from? 38:28
And the ice? 38:29
Can you shoot lightning bolts? 38:35
Do you think you can just nullify my judgments, condemn me, and justify yourself? 40:8

This is what it says, verbatim! Yet Jews have always valued the pursuit of knowledge in all its forms. Education is always uppermost on the Jewish agenda. Einstein once said,

The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence - these are features of the Jewish tradition that make me [happy] I belong to it.

When I was growing up in Egypt, my father, a man of modest means, made sacrifices to send all his children to the best private schools. He used to say, "The Arabs can take everything from you - your money, your house, your possessions, even the shirt on your back. But there is one thing they cannot take, and that's what's inside your head." Sure enough, they did take everything, and I survived with what my father arranged to have put inside my head.

The traditional morning prayer asks God:

Channenu me'itcha de'ah, bina, v'haskel
Grant us knowledge, understanding, discernment.

We are always thirsty for more knowledge. So how can knowledge be bad?

Well, the Sources seem to say that, indeed, there are things we are not meant to know and should not inquire about.

Let's begin with the story of creation, in Genesis:
(Gen. 2:16-17): And God commanded the man saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you will surely die.'

(Gen. 3:4): [But] the snake said to the woman, 'You will not surely die! God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be as gods, knowing good and evil.'

(Gen. 3:22-24): And God said, 'Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!' Therefore God banished him from the garden of Eden... and placed at the East of the garden of Eden cherubim, and a flaming ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the tree of life.'

So there is knowledge that God does not want us to have yet. God does not want us to be like God.

Later, in Deuteronomy (29:28), the Torah says:

Ha-nistarot ladonai elohenu
The secret things belong to the LORD our God

v'ha-niglot lanu ulvanenu
and the revealed things belong to us and to our children

'ad 'olam
forever

la'asot et kol divrei hattorah hazzot
that we may follow all the words of this teaching.

In an unusual flourish for emphasis, the words "For us and our children" include extra dots above each letter on the scroll.

Psalm 115 (:16) says:

The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he gave over to man.

Ecclesiastes (11:5) says:

As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.
The Mishna (Hagigah 2.1 -- 11b) has similar admonitions:

One should not discuss illegal unions unless there were three beside him, nor the creation unless there were two beside him, nor the divine chariot with [only] one individual, unless he was a wise man and had much knowledge of his own. Everyone who tries to know the following four things, it would have been better for him if he had never come into the world: What is above, what is below, what was before creation, and what will be after all is destroyed.

The Gemara (Hagigah 13a) quotes the apocryphal book of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus (3:21-22):

Do not seek out the things that are too hard for you, and do not inquire in the things that are hidden from you. Instruct yourself in what is permitted; you have no business with the secret things.

The Talmud records the story of the four rabbis who ventured into mysticism. Ben Azzai gazed and died. Ben Zoma became insane. Elisha ben Avuyah left Judaism and became an apostate. Only Akiva emerged unscathed, and went on to become one of the greatest rabbis in our history.

On Ben Zoma becoming mad, the Talmud adds:

To him the passage [in Proverbs 25:16] may be applied: ‘Have you found honey? Eat as much as is enough for you, lest you consume too much of it and have to vomit it forth.’

What do we make of all these passages?

One possibility is that God does not want us to suffer. God is withholding certain knowledge out of concern for our welfare. I can accept that, even though it's not clear to me what kind of knowledge could possibly cause me to suffer. (How can anything be weirder than quantum mechanics or relativity?) Actually, it's not knowledge *itself* that God wants to shield us against, but *premature* knowledge of things we are not psychologically prepared to know. And the 'premature' part applies to the individual, not to humanity as a whole. Note that the Talmud says, "It would have been better FOR HIM if he had not come into the world". The key part is "FOR HIM". In the same vein, when God is concerned that people might live forever, it may be because it would not be good *for people* to live forever. It is easy to figure out why: If we lived forever, we would have very little
incentive to achieve anything, since there is always a tomorrow; and besides, young people would never get a chance to make progress by trying out new ideas, if their elders stay in charge forever.

But, if so, as we pursue knowledge, how do we know what's permitted and what's not? How do we know if we are ready or not? The tradition drops some hints. For example, the Talmud says, in Pirkei Avot (5:25):

A five-year-old begins Scripture; a ten-year-old begins Mishnah; a 13-year-old becomes obliged to observe the commandments; a 15-year-old begins the study of Gemarah; an 18-year-old goes to the marriage canopy; a 20-year-old begins pursuit [of a livelihood]; a 30-year-old attains full strength; a 40-year-old attains understanding; a 50-year-old can offer counsel...

But still, that answer is incomplete.

A second possibility, as some commentators have suggested, is that we may physically not be able to understand certain things - that we are just not smart enough. They say, "Can a monkey understand the theory of relativity?" I reject this view most emphatically.

-First, even if it's true, we cannot possibly know that it's true. We don't know the limits of our mind.
-Second, God did give us a mind. So God must want us to use it and TRY to understand. God also gave us the gift of curiosity. We WANT to know. It may take us 100 years or 10,000 years, but, as a scientist, I have faith that we will continue to understand more and more of the universe around us. Anything less is a defeatist attitude.
-Third, if that's the explanation, then God is just admonishing us against wasting our time, which doesn't seem to square with the urgency of the command to avoid certain lines of inquiry.

A third possibility is that God may fear that if we understood the Divine Plan, we could intentionally mess it up. Its success depends on us being ignorant of its details. That’s the predominant feeling I get from reading these quotes, and this explanation may be right on the money.

What do we conclude from all this? Well, the world has always been leery of new knowledge, for the same reason change of any kind is not always welcome among people who feel reasonably satisfied. The new knowledge can be used for good or for evil. The new knowledge has given us the
information explosion (through the Internet) as well as weapons of mass destruction. Judaism teaches that all knowledge is good, but only when you are ready for it. Unfortunately, it does not make it easy for us to determine *when* that is.

Shabbat shalom.