

Parshat Ki Tissa

Moses' Face

What happens to a person who spends forty days and forty nights talking to God on a mountaintop? Moses testifies about himself: "I stayed on the Mountain for forty days and forty nights. I ate no bread and drank no water." (Deut 9:9 and Exodus 34:28) Is it possible for a regular human being not to eat for forty days? How is Moses affected by this superhuman feat? How does Moses change as a result of his close encounter with God?

Chavruta Study

1. See Shemot 34:29-35.

These are difficult pesukim. Even the basic understanding here is challenging.

2. Why did Moshe's face radiate?

See the pesukim. esp. v.29

See Rashi (v29)

3. At what times did Moshe wear a veil?

- See Ibn Ezra v.29, 34. Rashi v. 32-5. Ramban v.33.Haemek Davar (Rav Naftali Tzvi Berlin.)
- Why does he need the veil?
- Before whom is he masked, and before whom is he open-faced? What does this say about Moses at this point in his life?

4. Our Shiur this week concludes with a discussion that focuses upon the fallout created by the meteoric prophetic heights reached by Moshe Rabbeinu. The most accessible place to read a full description of Moses' uniqueness regarding Prohecy is in the writings of the Rambam.

See:

1. Hil. Yesodei Hatorah ch.8

2. Shmona Perakim ch.7

Shiur: Moses' Radiance

"Moses descended Mount Sinai, holding the two tablets of the testimony when he came down from the mountain; and Moses was unaware that the skin of his face was radiant, since God had spoken to him. Aaron and all the people saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant and they shrank from approaching him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and the leaders of the community returned to him and he spoke to them. Afterwards all the Children of Israel approached him and he instructed them concerning all the Lord had spoken on Mt.

Sinai. And when Moses finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses came before the Lord to speak with Him he would remove the veil until he came out. He would come out and tell the Children of Israel that which he had been instructed. The Children of Israel saw Moses' face, that the skin of his face was shining and Moses would then put the veil back on his face until he went in to speak with Him." (Exodus 34:29-35) [1]

This passage records a most remarkable and even startling phenomenon. Moses' face shines with such brilliance that the people are frightened to approach him. And hence, we find Moses walking through the Israelite camp with his face veiled.

How are we to understand this story? Why did Moses' face shine with such brilliance? Where did Moses' radiance come from? How long did it last? Did this radiance stay with him for the next forty years? Was Moshe veiled from that moment on?

PART I - MOSES' RADIANCE AND THE GOD-ISRAEL RELATIONSHIP.

Let us look for some answers as to the source of Moses' radiance:

THE "TABLETS OF TESTIMONY" AND THE RENEWAL OF THE COVENANT.

"The first tablets of stone were given amidst the sounds of revelation and this (second) set of tablets were handed over quietly, in private. Hence, God wanted to demonstrate that these (second) tablets were also spoken and given in holiness, from God. It was for this reason that God made Moses' face shine with the brightness of the Divine when he received them." (Bechor Shor)

What are the tablets of stone? In the Torah, the two tablets of stone are called "tablets of testimony" (31:18) or 'tablets of the covenant' (34:30). They are "a testimony and a covenant between God and Israel" [2]. How are we to understand this cryptic phrase? Simply put, the tablets are a demonstration and a sign that there is a connection, an everlasting agreement, between God and Israel. It is as if they are the verification, the certificate, or the "*ketuba*" that seals the God-Israel relationship. The text is the detail of the contract that binds God and Israel together. As long as the relationship exists, the contract must be abided by.

The first tablets found their origin in the impressive revelation at Sinai. After that overwhelming spectacle, Moses was invited to ascend the mountain to receive "the stone tablets, the Torah and the commands" (24:13) directly from the Almighty. But then, forty days later, came

the traumatic schism of the golden calf. The people betrayed God and the laws that they had agreed to obey. Moses came down the mountain with the symbols of covenant in his hands, and when he “saw the calf and the dancing...he hurled the tablets from his hand and shattered them.” (32:19) Why did Moshe smash the *luchot*? What did he seek to express by such an act? Simply this: The “tablets of testimony,” symbolic representation of the pact between God and Israel, were now meaningless. Their shattering was an automatic result of Israel's betrayal, for what is the value of a contract if the terms of the agreement have been violated? The Children of Israel had already broken their side of the deal. The covenantal document had been abrogated and torn asunder.

After the episode of the calf we read about the efforts to repair the damage. We read of Moses' earnest prayers on behalf of the people. We listen on as he argues passionately with God. (This is the basic content of Chapter 33) And then, in an atmosphere of forgiveness and renewal, God invites Moses to reaffirm the covenant. God states that He is willing to give Israel a second chance. Chapter 34 describes the terms of a renewed covenant and we hear God utter the 13 attributes of mercy indicating His desire to forgive the Children of Israel for their misdemeanours.

The symbol of healing and repair of this relationship with God is the creation of a second set of tablets (34:2), identical to the first. These tablets are the result of a “joint effort” between God and Moses: Moses hewed out the stones and hauled them up to the mountain-top and God wrote on them, engraving the words of the Ten Commandments for a second time.

Were these tablets “second rate”? Indeed, was this covenant second-rate? In other words, could the damage to the covenantal relationship between Israel and God be given to absolute repair? And how would Bnei Yisrael know that the relationship had been fully healed, rehabilitated?

When God wanted to deliver the message of healing, he sent a familiar covenantal symbol, a new deed of contract. The second tablets appeared identical to the first set and yet they were delivered without fanfare, “thunder and lightning.” Where was the national spectacle of God's revelation? In order to affirm that these tablets were “God approved” no less than the earlier ones, Hashem gave Moses an appearance of brilliant radiance. The people needed only to look at Moses and to realise that the second covenant was equivalent to the first. The covenant was renewed.

THE EFFECTS OF THE GOLDEN CALF

RASHI however chooses a different focus. He stresses not God nor Moses, but the people; and he chooses to view this episode as bearing a somewhat negative undertone. He notes the inability of the Children of Israel to even look at Moses' face.

“See how the enormity of the effects of sin: Before the people had embarked upon their sin, it states

that “ the appearance of God's glory was like a consuming fire at the mountain top, seen by all of Israel” (24:17) - and the people were not shaken nor were they scared. Now, after the golden calf, fear grips the people and they tremble from the mere sight of the rays of light emerging from Moses.” (Rashi on 34:30)

Rashi's explanation is remarkable. It is not that Moshe is glowing; it is that the people cannot withstand the sight of this divine light. At Mt. Sinai the first time round, this glow did not seem as dazzling, as blinding. At that time, only a short time earlier, Am Yisrael's spiritual level was such that it could withstand unfiltered spiritual energy. Who knows? - Maybe they all glowed with a dazzling Godly brilliance as they stood at the foot of the mountain experiencing God Himself. But now after the spiritual fall of the Golden Calf, it is only Moses who bears such light, and they cannot even behold the sight of him in this state of being. Moses' God-inspired face is too much for the man sullied by sin. The Israelites cannot even look upon him.

Note that according to both interpretations that we have quoted, this episode is a footnote to the story of the Golden Calf. For the Bechor Shor, it tells us about the forgiveness and restoration of relations with God that followed the rift of the sin of the golden calf. It is a message of repair. According to Rashi the message is different, possibly opposite. This story demonstrates that after the Golden Calf, the people could not return to precisely the same position that they had been in before. They were irreversibly tainted, detrimentally affected by sin. Their spiritual refinement had been violated by their escapade with the calf. They will have to work hard and long to regain their spiritual level.

PART II – THE VEIL AND THE PERSONA OF MOSES

Thus far, we have demonstrated how this episode becomes a link in the narrative that depicts the saga of the God-Israel relationship. But this is not the complete story. Our episode must be examined from two further angles: The God-Moses relationship and Moses' relationship with the people.

Let us begin with the veil. What function did it serve? Did Moses wear it at all times? If God had wanted the people to see his face shine, then why did Moses need to cover his face?

A variety of explanations are proposed by the commentators.

1. BETWEEN MOSES AND THE PEOPLE: DIRECT CONTACT WITH GOD

Some suggest [4] that Moses indeed veiled his face at all times, in his interaction with the people. Even when he was teaching them Torah he wore it. Their proof is from the

final verse of our parsha:

“Moses would then put the veil back on his face until he went in to speak with Him”.

Moses removed his veil only before God. The logic is simple. After all, was the nation not terrified when they saw his appearance? - It makes sense for Moses to veil his face before the people. At the sight of him, they would turn aside; they could not approach him otherwise. If he wanted to have contact with his flock, he would have to veil his face.

But what was the nature of this brilliance that they saw? Was it the effect of the direct contact that Moses had had with God?

“Where did Moses receive the beams of majesty? The Rabbis said: From the cave, as it says “When my glory passes by I shall put you in the crevice of the rock.(33:22)” (Midrash Rabba)

Moses spoke to God “face to face” (33:11). His was the most direct encounter ever experienced with the Divine. Moses’ glow was a reflection of the glow of God. Moses - “Ish Ha’elokim” - the Man of God (Deut 33:1) had the brilliance of God Himself! And that is why the Moses had to be veiled: “So that the people will not feast their eyes (on the Godly light)” [5]. Moses is veiled because he is God-like and the Israelites must be cautious in their direct approach to him. For this reason Rabbeinu Bachya explains that Moses’ glow never left him:

“And this light which shone forth from his face never left him from the time that he was on Mt. Sinai. It was with him all his life.”

2. A SEPARATION BETWEEN HOLY AND UNHOLY

But other commentators dispute this explanation. In the verses, it tells us that Moses veiled himself only AFTER he had finished speaking with the people. Clearly there was no barrier between Moses and the people. The Abarbanel suggests that the reason for the veil was so that:

“He should not use this divine light when he was eating, drinking and sleeping, when he spoke with his wife and family about matters unrelated to Torah.”

It is as if Moses uses the veil to separate his life. Holy things are done unveiled, in a natural manner. Speaking to God, teaching Torah are natural processes for Moses. But mundane life; shopping, eating, talking about the household chores have to be done with a veiled face. Moses must contain, restrain his spirituality at that moment. It is interesting that despite the fact that Moses is portrayed here as naturally holy, he finds it easy to “switch” mode. He can find his way in “normal” life.

If we can summarise this approach, then, we will say that the veil is not between Moses and the people, but rather a

demarcation line between Moses’ Godliness and his humanity.

3. THE BRILLIANCE OF TORAH

A third explanation sees the divine glow as a product not of God but of Torah:

Rabbi Yehuda ben Nachman stated in the name of Resh Lakish: There was some ink left over on the pen which wrote the Torah. He passed it over his head and this was responsible for the ‘beams of majesty’.” (Midrash Rabba)

This beautiful explanation suggests that the law, the Torah itself, was responsible for this effect. It is not Moses who glows, but the Torah itself. And here we are saying something very deep. That Moses has become an embodiment of Torah, he is synonymous with Torah! The Ibn Ezra explains that Moses’ radiance was “recharged” every time he received a new law from God. This brilliance of his visage was a reflection of the brilliance of Torah. We might suggest, on this basis, that Moses’ face radiated only as long as the Torah was being given. When they left Mt. Sinai, this miraculous phenomenon might have stopped. At any rate, we never hear about it again in the Torah.

EPILOGUE: THE DISTANCING OF MOSES

In a sense, when we look back on the book of Exodus, we can identify a progression in the life of Moses. We can trace a process of spiritual ascent in Moses’ life as he moves from private individual to prophet to “man of God”.

But we can also identify another, more tragic development. This is the distancing of Moses from the people. His personal spiritual progression is going to gradually generate a separation between Moses and his people.

We can trace this progression throughout Sefer Shemot.

Our first images of Moses’ personality are from Shemot Chapter 2 where we see Moses involved in three incidents. In the first he saves a Jewish slave from a beating by an Egyptian slave master. In the second he attempts to settle a fight between two Israelites. In the third story, in the province of Midyan, he intervenes to save a group of girls at the Well, from some aggressive shepherds. Moses is portrayed in all these stories - our earliest image of him - as one who upholds justice, a man of action who is not afraid to pay the price for his actions, and a man whose heart lies with the people. Moses is not concerned with his own status. He is quick to get personally involved in saving the oppressed from their oppressor.[5b]

It is probably for these very reasons that he is picked by God to lead the Jewish people. At the burning bush, God informs him that He wishes Moses to lead His people from

Egypt. Moses refuses. He uses every possible excuse. In one argument, Moses tells God that he is of "slow of speech", apparently a quality that is likely to hamper his chances of successful lobbying in the court of the Pharaohs. God succeeds in appointing Moses but Aaron will be his spokesman (4:10-15). Moses, the man of the people, will now speak through Aaron. Even before Moses acts as Israel's leader, he talks through an intermediary, a first stage in his distancing from the people.

Moses' role in the Exodus is the next step that portrays him as something other than a regular human being. Moses is given wonders and miracles to perform for all to see. At the Red Sea, it is Moses who stretches out his hand and the sea splits. It is Moses who later strikes the rock to give water to the camp. It is Moses who has a direct link with God. Moses is not only a leader; he is a prophet who seems to be able to create a miracle at will.

"And they believed in God and Moses His servant"
(Shemot 14:31).

Moses and God can be spoken of in the selfsame breath.

But Moses still has ongoing contact with the people of Israel, he hears their worries and complaints with a smile. He acts as judge to solve their quarrels and disagreements.

"Moses sat as judge AMONG the people... from morning until evening." (18:13)

That is, until Jethro arrives. Jethro advises Moses that it is all too much:

"You will wear yourself out, and these people as well, the task is too heavy, you cannot bear it alone. Let me advise you ... You represent the people before God and bring the disputes before God ... set officers of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, let them judge the people at all times ...every major dispute will be brought to you." (18:17-22)

And Moses accepts the idea. He does not sit in judgement each and every day. And there are certain clear advantages to this new arrangement. Moses now has some time to think, to communicate with God, to plan and guide. But he has paid a weighty price. He has lost his daily contact with the nation. He is now the Supreme Court, presenting the most baffling cases to God. But he is at the top of a very long chain. How many cases does he see? How many people have access to him? How many common people does he have access to?

The revelation at Mount Sinai clearly takes this process a stage further. Moses is the man who survives on the mountain for over a month without food or water. The people see him talk with God. (33:7-10) It is Moses' voice (according to certain opinions - see Shemot 19:19) that they hear talking to them from Mount Sinai, amplified by God [6]. In the episode of the Golden calf, Moses is gone and they try to replace him with a god:

"Let us make for ourselves a god who will lead us, for this man Moses... we know not what has befallen him." (32:2)

Moses is perceived in demi-god dimensions!

And now, we have the veil. Moshe is not simply distanced in the minds-eye of the people. He now has a physical barrier to shield and divide him from the people.

In a spiritual sense, Moses has reached the highest point that man can reach. Might we suggest that is almost more comfortable with God that he is with humans? His natural, unveiled state is with God. He shines with a divine brilliance.

But the tragic correlation is that his ascent to the pinnacle of human prophetic achievement has also come at the price of Moses' distance from the people and his separation from them. Moses is now the "man of God," [6b] the teacher of Torah. Israel needs a leader such as Moses. We could not have received the Torah without a Moses [7]. The Torah is called the "Torah of Moses" (Malachi 3:22) because without a prophet on Moses' level there might never have been a Torah. But at the same time Moses has lost one aspect of his persona - he will now find it difficult to be the "man of the people." Has Israel lost him?

Two situations test this thesis. The first is in our parasha. After the terrible sin of the Golden Calf, Moses springs to the defence of the nation. He boldly confronts God, insisting that God forgive His people. Tenaciously he pushes and prods, stubbornly refusing to let God withdraw or distance Himself from the nation. Possibly here, we see the spiritual Moses, the "Man of God" par excellence, using his closeness to God to the benefit of the people. Moses is still where he always was: engaged with his nation, loving them, defending their interests and fighting for their survival.

But a second arena to test this theory of Moses' distancing comes in the tale of the trials and tribulations of Sefer Bamidbar; the spies, the Korach rebellion, and the other challenges that confront Moshe Rabbeinu during the wilderness years. How does Moses respond? Is he veiled, disconnected, in a spiritual ivory tower? Or is engaged, people oriented, an ideal leadership figure? When we begin to look at the Book of Bamidbar, we shall examine to what degree Moses responds as the "Man of God" or as the man of the People.

Shabbat Shalom

Footnotes

[1] I have deliberately quoted the entire passage, with its ambiguities and repetitions. The differences of opinion

between commentators rest on alternative readings of these complex verses. We would do well to share the inherent confusion within the text.

[2] Rashbam . Commentary to Exodus 25:16

[4] Ha'emek Davar

[5] Rabbeinu Bachya 34:33

[5b] Nechama Leibowitz has a wonderful article about this in her book on Parshat Shemot.

[6] See Rashi on Exodus 19:19

[6b] Devarim 33:1

[7] See the Rambam's seventh principle, and especially the commentary of Rav Yitzchak Shilat (Yeshivat Ma'aleh Adumim publications) pg.202-208. There Rav Shilat claims that Moses' prophecy was unique and (unnatural) and was orchestrated so that Am Yisrael could receive the Torah. His clarity of vision was created with this clear aim in mind.