

Shabbat Ki Tissa

Exodus 34:27-35

KEY KOSHI:

WHAT DOES MOSES' SHINING FACE TEACH US ABOUT GOD'S PRESENCE/REVELATION IN OUR LIVES?
HOW DOES MOSES' VEILING INFORM THE MESSAGE OF PURIM AS IT UNVEILS A HIDDEN PRESENCE?

P'SHAT—AWARENESS... The beginning of knowing about God is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are

34:27 And the Lord said to Moses: Write down these commandments, for in accordance with these commandments I make a covenant with you and with Israel.

28] And he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water; and he wrote down on the tablets the terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

29] So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. 30] Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him. 31] But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. 32] Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he instructed them concerning all that the Lord had imparted to him on Mount Sinai. 33] And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

34] Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35] the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him.

27 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כְּתֹב לְךָ אֶת־
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי עַל־פִּי אֲדַבְּרִים
הָאֵלֶּה כְּבַרְתִּי אִתְּךָ בְּרִית וְאֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל׃
28 וַיְהִי־שֵׁשׁ עִם־יְהוָה אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם
וְאֶרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַל וּמַיִם לֹא
שָׁתָה וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל־הַלְּחָת אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית
עֲשֹׂרֵת הַדְּבָרִים׃ 29 וַיְהִי בְרֹדֶת מֹשֶׁה
מִהָר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה
בְּרֹדֶתוֹ מִן־הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע כִּי קָרוֹ
עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אֹתוֹ׃ 30 וַיֵּרָא אַהֲרֹן וְכָל־
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרוֹ עוֹר פָּנָיו
וַיִּירָאוּ מִגִּשְׁת אֱלֹהֵי׃ 31 וַיִּקְרָא אֲלֵהֶם
מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אֵלָיו אַהֲרֹן וְכָל־הַנְּשֹׂאִים
בְּעֵדָה וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם׃ 32 וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן
נָגְשׂוּ כָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּצְוֶם אֶת כָּל־אִשָּׁר
דָּבָר יְהוָה אֹתוֹ בְּהָר סִינַי׃ [מִפְטִיר]
33 וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדַּבֵּר אִתָּם וַיִּתֵּן עַל־פָּנָיו
מַסּוּהָ׃ 34 וּבָבֹא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְדַבֵּר
אִתּוֹ יָסִיר אֶת־הַמַּסּוּהָ עַד־צֵאתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא
וַדַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה׃
35 וַרְאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרוֹ
עוֹר פָּנָיו מֹשֶׁה וְהֵשִׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּסּוּהָ
עַל־פָּנָיו עַד־בֹּאוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ׃

REMEZ—UN-SELF-AWARENESS...

V. 29

So Moses came down from Mt. Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him

Sarna...A unique phenomenon conveyed by a unique Hebrew verb, *KaRaN*. The traditional meaning is favored by Habakuk 3:4, in which *Karayim*, “rays of light,” appear in parallelism to “a brilliant splendor.” Moses’ radiance is a reflection of the Divine Radiance...

Rashi...*had become radiant*...How was it that Moses merited these rays of splendor?

Our Rabbis taught [TANCHUMA] The radiance resulted from the Divine hand with which God had sheltered Moses [33:22] when He showed him glimpses of His Glory.

Midrash Tanchuma...R’ Judah ben Nachman said in the name of Resh Lakish: Wherein did Moses merit the beams of God’s Glory? When God taught Moses Torah to transcribe for Israel, there was some ink still left in the pen. When he wiped back his hair, the ink got on his head.

Ibn Kaspi...When Moses descended the mountain, the spiritual impact of his communion with the Holy One clung to him, adding a dimension to his being...It is a grave mistake to render it as anything tangible, for it is the equivalent of the actualized power of the human will.

Or HaChayim...Moses was unaware, because coming down from the mountain he was holding the two tablets, and presumed the light beamed forth not from him but from them- the light of the Torah.

Alshech...Torah uses this way of describing Moses’ descent to underline that the holiness Moses acquired on the Mountain during his stay in God’s proximity did not evaporate once he returned to earthly surroundings. The evidence was, first of all, his ability to carry the heavy tablets in one hand. Since he had become so thoroughly spiritualized, he did not even notice that his face gave off the rays. One might even assume that in the higher regions Moses came from, these light emissions would not even have been visible...but rather the regular radiance of being in the Presence of God.

V. 30

Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses’ face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him.

Sarna...The peculiar threefold use of *karan*...is probably a pointed allusion to the golden calf, for *keren* is the usual word for a horn. It subtly emphasizes that the true mediator before God and Israel was not the fabricated, lifeless image of the horned animal, as the people thought, but the living Moses.

Sifrei...*and they shrank from coming near him*...Come and see how great is the power of sin. Until they extended their hand in sin [by worshipping the Golden Calf], what does [the Torah] say? *The appearance of the glory Of God was like a consuming fire on the mountain top before the eyes of the Children of Israel [24:17]* but they neither feared nor trembled. But from the time when they made the Gold Calf, they shivered and trembled even before the rays of glory of Moses!

Leibowitz... Sin had deprived them of the ability to see with spiritual insight capable of appreciating the most holy and sublime. Had they honored the Divine call to be “*holy as I the Lord am Holy*,” they would have felt, each one of them, the rays of majesty in their own heart- the Divine image in them. Since that image in them had become blurred they were afraid to approach the one whose holiness shone forth from his very countenance.

V. 33

And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Be’er Moshe...Moses wore the mask to spare the people the embarrassment of seeing how they had so deprived themselves of closeness to God that they could not even look at his prophet.

Abravanel...Moses felt that it was not right for him to use this glow in ordinary everyday matters...But when he was imparting the message of Torah to Israel he did not veil his face so they would feel the full spiritual impact.

Ralbag...Moses attained an extraordinary degree of spirituality on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights without food or drink...These heights of godliness and spirituality were reflected in the beams sent forth by his countenance, and this preeminence of mind over matter remained with him even when he came down from the mountain. The halo of spirituality in which he moved prevented him from noticing the Israelites when they came to consult him. When the latter saw this, they were afraid to approach him so wrapped up was he. At this, Moses called them and spoke to them. It was then he put on the veil- to signify that he tried to shake off his excess spirituality in order to bring himself down to an earthy level and converse with them. But when he communed with God, he removed the veil.

V. 34-5

Whenever Moses would come before the Presence to speak with Him, he’d remove the veil...and whenever he’d come out to speak to Israel that which had been commanded, they would see Moses’ face—skin radiant, but then Moses would put the veil back on his face.

Leibowitz...Just as he received God’s message without a veil, so he transmitted it. Moses did not hide behind it or make Judaism into an esoteric cult for the initiated only, but imparted it to all Israel without discrimination, just as He received it at the hand of God. His was a generous giving over of his knowledge and the fruits of his inspiration...Only when he was not engaged in teaching that he covered the glow of his face

D'RASH—READING BETWEEN THE WORDS...

Prof. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg

When Moses descends the mountain with the second tablets, a new regime begins. This is signaled by the light that radiates off his face: after all, his desire to be transformed has been enigmatically, unwittingly realized....Questions abound: what is the nature of the light? Why does it appear just at this juncture? Why does Moses at first “not know” about it? If the people are at first afraid of his luminous face, so that they recoil from him, what overcomes their fear?

The origin of Moses' rays of light is “from the cave”: a cryptic answer that teases the midrashic reader out of thought. “From the cave”: from the darkness deepened by God's obscuring hand, from not seeing God's face, Moses' face was imprinted with light....Moses' face is scarred with radiance. A new source of revelation opens for him, this time not one of effortless “gift,” but of struggle...The revelation-by-veiling is, in a real sense, leaves a mark.

Why is it only now that Moses radiates light? As Beit Yaacov puts it, even if the first Revelation was more direct than the second, its light was merely *seen* by Moses: it was not *absorbed* by him....With the second Revelation, Moses' heart accepted a deep imprint....

The answer selected by Rashi—“*from the cave*”—contains the most compressed poetic force. Rays are the expression of a narrowing and intensifying of light, piercing through a crack....God's light is hidden, and that obstruction creates brilliant rays. Indeed, quite prosaically, human vision becomes possible only by a limiting of vision: too close, too bright, too total a light simply dazzles and blinds. A fissure in the rock yields piercing fragments of illumination which are not merely seen, but absorbed into the very fabric of Moses' being.

In describing Moses' radiant descent from the mountain, the Torah emphasizes, not his light, but his *unawareness* of that light... “*Moses did not know*”: this is the principal clause of the sentence. *Not knowing* the light takes precedence over the existence or the origin of the light. ...In Chasidic teachings, this unself-conscious absorption becomes an ideal condition for holiness... “*Moses did not know*...” suggests that the condition for such a light is humility...That is, the light comes from the unself-conscious joy of *dibbur*, of the dialogue of sacred words....

However, if Moses' face is uncovered as he speaks to the people, this may suggest something about the nature of the dialogue. At this moment, in the fullest sense, Moses acquires his central identity as *teacher*. The fire in his bones is transformed into the light in the face; and Moses allows his people to see that most private light, generated by God's absence and much lonely labor—allows them to see it...Moses deliberately exposes his face, traumatized by rays of vision through a fissure in the rock, as an aid in their learning process.

The first Revelation took place in the glare of the public gaze; the second Revelation excluded any human gaze. This unwitnessed, unself-conscious encounter represents the most radical liberation from idolatry. Moses has no image to serve, not even the image of his own past words...Moses lives the reality of the cave—of a fragmentary vision...Instead of being the inert reflection of God's Face, his own face gleams with the light of a constant becoming.

[The Particulars of Rapture, Zornberg, pgs 443-449. Doubleday]

SOD—The SELF of the UNIVERSE... God's "I am" has the psycho-theological force not of dissolving individual selves but of reminding us that we were never individual selves in the first place...Our selfhood endures by virtue of its participation in some greater Self,

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin...

In the month of Sivan was the Divine Revelation at Sinai. In the month of Tammuz, 40 days later, the smashing of the Tablets, and on Yom Kippur, 80 days later, the second tablets and the new Covenant based on Israel's repentance. The people of Israel must come of age by taking responsibility for their actions and for the world. But with this new Revelation, their God is now hidden behind the curtain of the Holy of Holies...So the mask that covers Moses' face when he descends from the mountain for the second time reflects the mask that will hide the Almighty from directly guiding His people and His world. Neither Israel nor humanity are ready, as of yet, for such direct, Divine intervention. The new paradigm for God-in the World, for the Presence, will not be direct Revelation at Sinai but, rather...the masquerade of Purim, when God's Name is not directly present in the scroll of Esther. Esther quite literally means "*hiddenness*." The Israelites must now carry this new responsibility of interpreting Torah and so seeing God through their world on their long march towards redemption!

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg...

It would be easy, based on the court intrigue and bedroom machinations, to dismiss Purim as secular, not sanctioned by God...This is expressed in the absence of God's Name in the Scroll of Esther. However, by their acceptance of Purim, the people and ultimately the Rabbis showed their grasp of how we understand the Presence of God in a post-prophetic age. We realize that God operates not as a force crashing into history from the outside but in the center of life as the One who is present in the natural redemptive process in which the human is co-partner...On Purim, a mature Jewish people, rejecting the need for audio-visual fireworks, discern Goid's hidden Presence in the unfolding of history...concluding that, even in Shushan, flawed human beings are carriers of the light of divine redemption.