

"For the skin of his face shone"
By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. Two Descents from the Mountain

Twice in our *parasha*, Moshe descends from Mount Sinai: he brings down the first set of tablets prior to the sin of the Golden Calf and then the second set following the sin. The two events are introduced with similar language:

Moshe turned and he came down from the mountain, with the two Tablets of Testimony in his hand. (32:15)

And it was, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai – and the two Tablets of Testimony were in Moshe's hand... (34:29)

But here the similarity ends. The two descents differ in many respects, one of the most prominent differences being that on his second descent, the text notes that Moshe's face shone:^[1]

And it was, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai – and the two Tablets of Testimony were in Moshe's hand when he descended from the mountain – that Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke with him. And Aharon and all of *Bnei Yisrael* saw Moshe, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him. (34:29-30)

We then read that when Moshe's face shone, he donned a veil, removing it only when he stood before God and when he conveyed God's word to *Bnei Yisrael*:

Moshe called to them and they returned to him – Aharon and all the princes amongst the congregation – and Moshe spoke to them. And afterwards all of *Bnei Yisrael* drew near, and he commanded them all that God had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. And Moshe finished speaking with them, and he placed a veil over his face. And when Moshe came before God, that He might speak with him, he removed the veil, until he emerged; then he emerged and said to *Bnei Yisrael* that which he had been commanded. And *Bnei Yisrael* saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face shone, and Moshe replaced the veil on his face, until he went to speak with Him. (verses 31-35)

Unquestionably, this is a dramatic change for Moshe's image and his standing in the eyes of the nation.^[2] From this point onwards, whatever Moshe conveyed to the nation in God's Name would be obeyed, in fear of and in deference to the sight of his shining face. But why does this change take place specifically upon his second descent from the mountain?

One might suggest that this phenomenon should really have occurred with the descent of the first Tablets, but it was delayed because of the sin of the Golden Calf and the need to deal with its consequences. Below we shall attempt to propose a different explanation: that the radiance of Moshe's face was actually a *result* of the sin, and that had the sin not taken place, this phenomenon would not have occurred at all.

B. "For this Moshe, the Man"

In order to understand the need for this unique phenomenon, we must go back to the roots of the sin of the Golden Calf:

And when the nation saw that Moshe was late in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aharon and said to him: "Arise, make us a god who will go before us, for this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him." (32:1)

The people express their distress by drawing a contrast between "Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt" and the demand for "a god who will go before us."^[3] They are not looking for another mortal leader to take Moshe's place. They want a radical change in leadership. They no longer want to follow a flesh-and-blood mortal, who may disappear at any time; rather, they want to be led by a "god."^[4] The Golden Calf is meant to represent divine, non-human leadership and to satisfy the nation's longing for this sort of figurehead.

As we know, the nation was severely punished for the sin. Aside from the three thousand people slain by the tribe of Levi and the plague, God tells the people that He will no longer go up in their midst. The nation had demanded a god that would go before them, and as a result, measure for measure, they will no longer be accompanied by God Himself, but rather by His angel:

God spoke to Moshe: "Proceed; go up from here, you and the nation which you brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, saying, 'To your descendants I shall give it.' And I shall send before you an angel, and I shall drive out the Canaanite, the Emori, the Chitti, the Perizzi, the Chiwi, and the Yevusi – to a land flowing with milk and honey, for I shall not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked nation, lest I consume you along the way." (33:1-3)

However, along with the punishment, there was also a measure of understanding of the reality that had led to the sin. To repair that reality, there was a need to "upgrade" Moshe's standing in the eyes of the people. From this point on, there is a change in what until now has been a remarkably human description of Moshe's life.^[5] He is now awarded a status that is higher than that of any ordinary person.

The first place where we see this taking effect is in another difference between the first and second sets of tablets: the Divine origin and character of the former, as opposed to Moshe's partnership in creating the latter. Three times in our *parasha*, the text emphasizes the Divine, unique qualities of the first tablets, fashioned by God Himself:

The two Tablets of Testimony, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. (31:18)

And the Tablets were a work of God, and the inscription was an inscription of God, engraved upon the Tablets. (32:16)

The second tablets, in contrast, are fashioned by Moshe:

Hew for yourself two tablets of stone, like the first ones... so he hewed two tablets of stone, like the first ones. (34:1-4)

It is not even clear from the text who inscribed the tablets – God or Moshe.^[6]

Moreover, the three-fold repetition of the fact that the first tablets were a work of God is replaced, in the story of the second tablets, with the fact that Moshe's face shone – which is likewise emphasized three times:

... Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke with him. And Aharon and all of *Bnei Yisrael* saw Moshe, and behold, the skin of his face shone... And *Bnei Yisrael* saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face shone... (34:29-35)

Once again, the miraculous aspect of the Revelation at Sinai focuses not on the tablets, but rather on Moshe.^[7] The effect of this new phenomenon is immediately discernible:

And Aharon and all of Bnei Yisrael saw Moshe, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him. (34:30)

The tone of slight disdain that we detect in the words, "For this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him," has been transformed into fear of him. Admittedly, once Moshe calls to the people, they are no longer afraid, but from this point on, his radiant face is a regular sight, and the one-time fear (*yir'a*) becomes an ongoing "seeing" (*re'iy'a*):

And when Moshe came before God, that He might speak with him, he removed the veil, until he emerged; then he emerged and said to *Bnei Yisrael* that which he had been commanded. And *Bnei Yisrael* saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face shone... (34-35)

From now on, *Bnei Yisrael* will see Moshe's radiant face when he brings them God's word, and they will know that while he is indeed "Moshe, the man," this man occupies a very lofty and unique spiritual level.

C. "And Moshe Did Not Know"

The change in Moshe's status is, of course, an exceptional phenomenon, which had not originally been planned to happen, nor was it repeated in any person other than Moshe. The Torah does not turn mortals into Divine figures, nor does it ever conceal the human traits of any of its characters. For this reason, our *parasha* – with its deviation from the usual norm in the Torah – requires some balancing of the picture. Along with the elevation of Moshe beyond human norms, we therefore find an emphasis on the fact that Moshe is and remains human.

This would seem to explain the specific noting of the fact that "Moshe did not know that the skin of his face shone when He spoke with him." This contains something of an echo of the verse that set the whole episode in motion: "For this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him." Moshe, just like each of *Bnei Yisrael*, is a person, who sometimes does not know what is happening.

This emphasis has further significance. Since Moshe was unaware of his radiance, he did not change his conduct in any way. He descended the mountain just as he had ascended it – with the same personality and embodying the same human leadership vis-à-vis the nation.

The main expression of Moshe's humility would seem to lie in the fact, emphasized in the text, that the radiance of his face was solely the result of God's revelation to him. The veil that he wore over his face showed that there was no significance to this radiance in and of itself. Moshe removed the veil only when standing before God or when bringing God's word to the people – thereby showing that the radiance of his face was a Divine phenomenon, while he himself was simply a means, a channel of communication. Moshe does not exploit the radiance of his face for any personal ends, and when he is acting independently, he wears a veil to cover it.^[8]

Thus, even when his face shone, this towering leader of *Bnei Yisrael* remained "Moshe, the man." Moreover,

The man Moshe was the most exceedingly humble of all men upon the face of the earth. ([Bamidbar 12:10](#))^[9]

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] As is well known, the ancient Latin translation of the *Tanakh*, the Vulgate, interprets the phrase "*karan or panav*" – which appears nowhere else in *Tanakh* – in the sense of "*karnayim*" – horns. This interpretation had a very significant influence on the Christian understanding of this chapter, as reflected in some artistic renditions of Moshe. The concept of "horns" seems inappropriate here, and would seem to have been influenced by some Greek and Roman kings who sometimes wore horns on their heads as a symbol of military strength; we see that Tzidkiya ben Kena'ana similarly fashions horns for the king of Israel (see *Melakhim I* 22:11). We shall adopt the conventional view that the text means that Moshe's face was radiant. Some of the commentators cite, in support of this interpretation, the obscure verse in *Chabbakuk* (3:4), "And there shall be a brightness like light, He has radiance (*karnayim*) at His side, and there His

power is concealed." (In addition, the words "*karan or panav*" may hint at the same idea through the similarity between the word "*or*" written with an *ayin*, meaning "skin" (as in our verse), and "*or*" written with an *alef*, meaning "light.") Rashbam, who was well acquainted with the Christian interpretation of the verse, adds here: "And one who equates [the word *karan*] here with [its meaning in] the expression, '*karnei re'em karnav*' ('His horns are the horns of a wild ox;' [Devarim 33:17](#)), is simply foolish, for this expression has two different meanings in the Torah."

[2] As Ibn Ezra notes in his short commentary: "Know that we find no greater sign than this among the prophets, for every [other] wonder that God introduced in order to support His prophets involved outside elements, other than themselves."

[3] Aharon describes the circumstances that give rise to the creation of the Golden Calf using the same terms: "They said to me, 'Make us a god that will go before us, for this Moshe, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has become of him'" (32:23).

[4] It is ironic that what the nation perceives here as a deficiency is highlighted as having impressed the Egyptians right before *Bnei Yisrael* left their country: "Also **the man, Moshe**, was exceedingly great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of Pharaoh's servants and in the eyes of the people" ([Shemot 11:3](#)).

[5] The story of his birth and origins (chapter 2); his unwillingness to take on God's mission of going to bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt and the lengthy negotiations that he maintains (chapters 3-4); the fact of his speech impediment (4:10); the record of his genealogy (6:14-26), etc.

[6] On the one hand, God tells Moshe explicitly, "Hew for yourself two tablets of stone, and **I shall write** upon the tablets **the words** that were upon the first tablets, which you broke" (34:1). On the other hand, further on in the chapter we read: "God said to Moshe: **Write for yourself these words**, for it is by these words that I have forged a covenant with you and with Israel. And he was there with God for forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread, nor did he drink water, and **he wrote upon the tablets** the words of the covenant – the ten utterances" (verses 27-28). From *Sefer Devarim* it is clear that it was God Who wrote on the second tablets: "At that time, God said to me, 'Hew for yourself two stone tablets like the first ones, and come up the mountain to Me, and make for yourself a wooden ark. And **I shall write upon the tablets the words** that were upon the first tablets, which you broke, and you shall put them in the ark.' So I made an ark of Shittim wood, and I hewed two tablets of stone, like the first ones, and I ascended the mountain, with the two tablets in my hand. And **He wrote upon the tablets the same writing as on the first**, the ten utterances which God spoke to you upon the mountain, from amidst the fire, on the day of the gathering, and God gave them to me" ([Devarim 10:1-4](#)). For this reason, many of the commentators conclude that the verse in our *parasha*, "And He wrote upon the tablets..." (34:28), also refers to God. However, verse 27 still presents a problem: "God said to Moshe: 'Write for yourself these words.'" The commentators suggest different solutions for the seeming contradiction. The Ramban understands this as referring to a different act of writing: "He commanded that [Moshe] should write a book of the covenant and read it out to the people." Rashbam, in a similar vein, proposes that the command refers to what had been said previously, in verses 11-26. In any event, it is difficult to ignore the deliberately ambiguous language of the Torah, which implies that Moshe participated, in some manner, in the writing of the second set of tablets,

as well as the fact that there is no mention here of the second tablets being written "in God's writing," as we are told concerning the first tablets.

[7] This difference expresses the same idea that we discussed in the *shiur* on *Parashat Teruma*, concerning the relationship between the Written Law and the Oral Law. With the first Tablets the emphasis is on the writing, representing the Written Law and the Revelation at Sinai. With the second Tablets the emphasis is on God's word as revealed to Moshe at all times, representing the continuous renewal embodied in the Oral Law.

[8] This is the simple meaning of the text, and this is how Ibn Ezra (in his long commentary on verse 34) understands it. However, he also cites a different opinion: "Some say that the radiance of Moshe's face was renewed each time he came to the Tent of Meeting and spoke with God. Then he would emerge, and the radiance would remain for as long as he conveyed God's word to the nation. When he finished he would don the veil, for he knew that the radiance would depart, leaving his face as it usually was. It would be to Moshe's detriment if *Bnei Yisrael* were to see his face without the radiance; therefore he would put on the veil." According to this explanation, the veil served Moshe's personal interest: it concealed his face from *Bnei Yisrael* when there was no radiance. However, Ibn Ezra concludes: "The Gaon said that the radiance did not depart from his face until the day he died; as a result, his vision was never dimmed. And this is correct... According to my view, he donned the veil in deference to the radiance with which God imbued his face, so that *Bnei Yisrael* would not see him at all times, but rather only when he conveyed to them God's words. He would remove the veil when he approached the Tent of Meeting, so that God could speak with him face to face."

[9] The title "man of God" is applied to Moshe for the first time only just prior to his death: "And this is the blessing with which Moshe, the man of God, blessed *Bnei Yisrael* before he died" ([Devarim 33:1](#)). Only when he about to depart this world, when it is clear to everyone that he is a man of flesh and blood – only then it is possible to refer to him not only as the "man," but also as the "man of God."

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