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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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"Moshe Hid His Face, For He Was Afraid to Look at God"

Based on a sicha of Harav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l

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Sefer Shemot focuses on two "main characters," describing at length the processes that they undergo: *Bnei Yisrael*, who leave Egypt and become a nation, and Moshe, who becomes their leader. We find some parallels between the development of *Am Yisrael* and that of Moshe; let us examine one of these parallels.

When Moshe encounters God for the first time, he quickly hides his face: "Moshe hid his face, for he feared to look at God" (*Shemot* 3:6). *Chazal* are divided as to how Moshe's reaction is to be evaluated:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha and Rabbi Hoshaya [debated]. One of them said: Moshe did not act properly in hiding his face, for had he not hidden his face, the Holy One would have revealed to him that which is above and that which is below, that which has been and that which is destined to be. Ultimately, Moshe asked to see [all of] this, as it is written, "Please show me Your glory," but the Holy One answered him: "I came to show you, and you hid your face; now I say to you: 'No man shall see Me and live.' When I wanted [to show you], you did not want [to see]!"

Rabbi Hoshaya Rabba maintained: Moshe acted properly in covering his face. The Holy One said to him, "I came to show you My face, and you showed Me respect by covering your face. By your life, you will spend forty days and forty nights with Me atop the mountain, without eating or drinking, and you will enjoy the glory of the Divine Presence," as it is written: "Moshe did not know that the skin of his face was radiant." Nadav and Avihu, on the other hand, uncovered their heads and feasted their eyes upon the glory of the Divine Presence, as it is written, "Upon the noble ones of *Bnei Yisrael* He did not put forth His hand," and they did not receive [a reward] for their actions. (*Shemot Rabba* 3:1)

This debate may hinge upon the reason for Moshe's fear when he hides his face. One possibility is that Moshe is seized with fright: he fears God's greatness and is unable to bear the intensity and power of the experience. On the other hand, perhaps it is not fear that seizes him but rather awe of God's exaltedness: he sees God's greatness and power, and understands that it is not proper that a mortal gaze at the "Face" of the infinite, immortal God.

The Torah describes how Moshe arrives at the burning bush:

Moshe was shepherding the flocks of Yitro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian, and he led the flocks beyond the wilderness, and he came **to the mountain of God**, to Chorev. (*Shemot* 3:1)

Rashi explains that the "mountain of God" is called thus because of what was destined to take place there later. According to his interpretation, Moshe arrived "coincidentally" at a place that was destined to be holy, but he had no idea of its sanctity. However, Seforno explains that Moshe went out to the wilderness to meditate and pray. According to his view, it would seem that Moshe was looking specifically for a holy place, and in the midst of his search he came upon a place that was called "the mountain of God."

If we adopt Seforno's view, we gain a clearer picture of the debate recorded in the midrash. If Moshe came to the mountain of God with the intention of seeking out God, but the moment he found Him he was struck with fear and hid his face, then we may understand the act in a negative light. If a person truly seeks God, it is not proper that when he finally finds Him, he runs and hides. However, if Moshe was seeking God and, when he found Him, he was suddenly fully conscious of God's greatness and power, and therefore hid his face out of awe in the presence of God's greatness – then his behavior is quite understandable and praiseworthy.

This type of experience – in which a person loves God and seeks His closeness, but when God is finally revealed to him, he senses the awe of His exaltedness and he flees – epitomizes our religious life. Each one of us experiences in his life the dialectical transition between love of God and fear of God, between the desire for closeness and the terror of the Infinite.

The nation of Israel undergo a similar process. When *Am Yisrael* arrive at Mount Sinai in order to receive the Torah, they sanctify and purify themselves in preparation for the lofty experience. However, after hearing the first two of the Ten Commandments directly from God, the people ask Moshe to convey the rest of the Commandments himself: "You speak with us and we shall hear; let God not speak with us, lest we die" (*Shemot* 20:15).

Here, again, there is a question of whether this request arose from a sudden fright that seized *Bnei Yisrael*, or whether it reflected their awe of God's exaltedness as they realized the full significance of their encounter with God. According to the first possibility, their request is unworthy: it is not proper for people to prepare themselves at such length for an encounter with God, and then – at the moment of the encounter – to be struck with fright. But according to the second view, their request is a positive one, appropriate to the sharp transition between love and fear that characterizes every person who seeks to come close to God and to cleave to Him.

We find both possibilities discussed in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 88b):

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: With each and every utterance that emanated from the Holy One, blessed be He, the souls of *Bnei Yisrael* left them, as it is written, "My soul went out as He spoke" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:6). But if their souls

left them with the first utterance, how did they receive the second? [God] rained down the dew that is destined to revive the dead, and it revived them...

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi also said: With each and every utterance that emanated from the Holy One, blessed be He, *Bnei Yisrael* retreated twelve miles, and the ministering angels led them back, as it is written, "Hosts of angels march; they march" (*Tehillim* 68:13) – do not read "march" (*yidodun*), but rather "lead" (*yedadun*).

According to the first explanation, with each utterance that they heard from God's mouth, *Bnei Yisrael* were filled with immense awe – to the point that their very souls departed. According to the second interpretation, *Am Yisrael* was seized not with an immense awe, but rather with inexplicable fright, leading the nation to flee and distance itself from the Divine Presence.

What was the real source of *Bnei Yisrael's* fear or awe at Mount Sinai? The answer to this question may be found in the description of the occasion as recorded in *Sefer Devarim*:

And it was, when you heard the Voice from amidst the darkness, with the mountain burning with fire, that you came close to me – all the heads of your tribes and your elders – and you said: "Behold, the Lord our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire... And now, why shall we die, for this great fire will consume us... You go near and hear all that the Lord our God will say, and you tell us all that the Lord our God tells you, and we will hear and we will do..."

God heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and God said to me: "I have heard the voice of the words of this nation which they have spoken to you; they have spoken it all well. May their hearts remain like this for them to fear Me, and to keep all My commandments all of the days, in order that it may be good for them and for their children forever." (*Devarim* 5:20-26)

Moshe fears, perhaps, that *Bnei Yisrael* have simply been seized with fright, and therefore he recounts their request using language that seems to reflect some degree of criticism. However, God makes it known to him that this is not mere fright, but rather awe of God's greatness – which is altogether praiseworthy.

In our religious lives, we are not able to choose only the aspect of love, or only the aspect of fear. A person who chooses only love can end up heading into paganism, while a person who chooses only fear will lose the ability to experience an encounter with God and to serve God with passionate emotion. The dialectic between love and fear is vital to our existence as mortals living in God's shadow, and as servants of God in particular.

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