

KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)

Who WAS That Masked Man?

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

It was to be the very first Yom Kippur. Moses was returning from the summit of Mount Sinai. He was carrying in his hands two blocks of sapphire.

This was his second such journey. Last time Moses came down the mountain carrying stone blocks he was dismayed by what he saw. He discovered, to his shock, that his People had quickly forgotten the lessons they had learned a short time before. They had heard G-d say the first two of the Ten Commandments: “*I am your G-d Who took you out of Egypt...*” and “*You will have no other gods before Me...*” (Exodus, 20:2, 3) Forty days later, Moses descended the mountain carrying the stone Tablets engraved with those Commandments engraved on them. He discovered his People dancing around a Golden Calf, singing, “*This is your god, Israel, who took you out of Egypt.*” (Ibid, 32:8) Moses smashed the Tablets; his People weren’t ready for them.

Now Moses was bringing a new set of Tablets. G-d had accepted Moses’ prayers for forgiveness for His People. Every year we commemorate that day as Yom Kippur, a day when G-d is prepared to forgive his People for their shortcomings.

Yes, Moses was back. He had returned to his nation... But something was different... it was... his face!

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the two Tablets... Moses did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant when He had spoken to him. (Ibid, 34:29)

Exposure to G-d’s sanctity had transformed Moses; his face glowed with holiness. This created a problem; his people couldn’t deal with it:

Aaron and all the Children of Israel saw Moses, and behold! The skin of his face had become radiant, and they feared to approach him. (Verse 30)

For the rest of his life Moses wore a veil over his face. He only removed it to hear G-d’s Word, and to convey it to the people. As soon as he finished teaching them, he replaced the veil and kept his face covered until his next prophecy from G-d.

What was the problem? Had they never seen holiness before? True, Moses looked different. He was “spiritually energized.” But what were they afraid of? After all, they had stood at Mount Sinai, where “...the appearance of the glory of G-d was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop *BEFORE THE EYES OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL*... (24:17) and they didn’t demonstrate any fear. Why couldn’t they look at Moses?

I’d like to suggest an answer.

Moses led our People out of Egypt. He had faith in us that we would be devoted to G-d. He led us through the Red Sea. He delivered a miraculous well and Manna from Heaven. He had high hopes for us. He brought us to Mount Sinai. He bid us farewell and promised to be back in forty days. Forty days later, Moses came down the mountain with the Tablets, looking forward to delivering G-d’s precious Torah to G-d’s precious People.

Then he saw it. He saw that calf. He saw us dancing around an idol. We let him down! After all Moses did for us, we let him down! He took those Tablets and dashed them down on the ground. Those Tablets, along with his hopes for his People, were smashed to pieces.

Now he was back. He brought us new Tablets. He had continued to learn G-d’s Torah. Unlike the rest of the Israelites, he had continued to grow in Torah. He was once again ready to share it with us.

...the Children of Israel saw Moses, and behold! The skin of his face had become radiant, and they feared to approach him...

Do you know why they feared to approach him? After all he had done for them, and after they had let him down, they couldn’t look him in the face! They were too ashamed!

Moses accommodated them. He didn’t want to “rub it in” that he had grown spiritually while they had shrunken. Therefore, when they saw him on a daily basis, his spiritual greatness was obscured by a veil.

It was only when Moses needed to teach them that he insisted that they see his face. When teaching them Torah, he wanted them to understand what they had lost by worshipping the Golden Calf, and what they could gain through devotion to Torah.

Rashi explains that the reluctance of the Israelites to look at Moses illustrates the devastating power of sin. The Nation of Israel stood at the base of the mountain and experienced the Divine Presence of G-d. They saw the lightning. They heard the voice of G-d. They didn’t waver. They were not afraid.

That was BEFORE. This was AFTER.

The nation that withstood the holiness of the Revelation at Sinai was the nation that had experienced the Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea. They had been spiritually uplifted by those events. They were ready for anything!

The nation that Moses found at the bottom of the mountain was a post-Golden Calf nation. It was a group of people who had sullied themselves through idol worship. They were no longer WORTHY of looking at true holiness.

We see here not only the negative power of sin. We also see the positive power of Torah.

These people were sinners; they forfeited their right to experience holiness first hand when they worshipped an idol. They were afraid to look at Moses; he was too holy. Yet, when Moses needed to tell the nation what G-d expected of them, he removed his veil and spoke to them. Apparently, they were still able to look at him while he was teaching them Torah.

We find a similar idea in reference to Abraham:

...G-d appeared to Abram and said to him "...walk before me and perfect yourself. I will make My covenant with you..."

Abram threw himself down upon his face, and G-d spoke with him... (Genesis 17:1-3)

Rashi observes that Abram fell down out of fear of G-d's Divine Presence, something that he didn't do later on in his life. This event took place BEFORE Abram's Bris. Once he circumcised himself, he gained the spiritual strength to receive prophecy without fear.

Same thing with the Jews at Sinai. As much as they had lowered themselves by worshipping the Golden Calf, all was not lost. They still had the Torah. Torah study and Torah observance enabled them to withstand the concentrated holiness of Moses' Torah.

Judaism is filled with customs and ceremonies. It feels good to do a Mitzvah. But does it change us? Do we feel holy when we do a Mitzvah? Do we understand that when we do G-d's will we elevate ourselves? Do we recognize that when we violate G-d's will we bring spiritual devastation upon ourselves and the world around us?

Some people use their non-observance as a justification for further non-observance. "Oh I can't put on Tefillin! I don't keep Kosher!"

So?

"Send my children to a Yeshiva? There's no way I could do that! I don't observe the Sabbath!"

So?

There is no justification for non-observance. But once someone chooses not to observe everything, that shouldn't be a reason not to observe SOMETHING!!

What if the Israelites had said, "Sorry, Moses. We're sinners. We worshipped the Golden Calf and are no longer worthy of looking at your face. We can't learn Torah. We're not worthy. So we're not going to bother."

Sounds like another religion!

Moses accomplished as much as he was able to. We need to accomplish all that we can do. By hiding behind a mask of non-observance, we are only hiding from ourselves.

Have a great Shabbos.

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