

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

Rabbi Yehoshua Blass, Mashgiach Ruchani – Yeshiva University



Parshas Ki Sisa - What Happens When One Trudges Back up the Mountain?

Many years ago late at night on a Motzei Shabbos I was walking through the old city of Tzfas with a group of friends and associates when one of the members of our group decided that he wanted to meet a mekubal. We were in the right city at the right time of day and pretty soon the four of us were ushered into the study of one of the leading Breslovers in Eretz Yisroel and supposedly a Kabbalist of some note.

While the details of what we spoke about nearly 30 years ago has not stayed with me, what I can never forget is his face and specifically his eyes. I had never seen a face like that. He had almost an angelic radiance and a holiness and fire in his eyes that is nearly impossible to describe. I remember walking out of his home and asking my friend how does a mortal man, born to a mother and of tangible flesh and blood develop such a radiance.

Of course what I didn't know then was that my question was posed nearly two thousand years earlier by the Medrash. After the entire drama that unfolds in Parshas Ki Sisa, including the entire narrative surrounding העגל הטא and the subsequent giving of the second luchos, Moshe Rabbeinu makes his way down from Har Sinai. In perhaps one of the most lasting images in the entire Torah, we are instructed that:

**וַיְהִי בְרִדְתָּ מִשֶּׁה מֵהַר סִינַי וַשִּׁי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה
בְּרִדְתָּ מִן־הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ
אִתּוֹ:**

And it was when Moshe descended from Mount Sinai and the two tablets were in his hands that Moshe didn't realize that the skin of his face was radiant because he had spoken with 'Him'.

As alluded to earlier, the question posed by the Medrashim and the Rishonim is מהיכן נטל, from where was the radiance taken from? Man is not an angel and the supernatural doesn't just occur without without reason and without explanation. In short what allows man to in a way transcend the limitations of his own physicality and corporeality?

The most simple and widely quoted pshat is

that the experience of Moshe receiving the Torah from G-d and the necessary hisbodedus between Moshe and HKB'H led to the transformation of Moshe Rabbeinu's personage. As Rashi says quoting the Medrash Tanchuma:

**כי קרן. לשון קרנים, שהאור מבהיק ובולט כמין קרן;
וימהיכן זכה משה לקרני ההוד? רבותינו אמרו מן
המערה, שנתן הקדוש ברוך הוא ידו על פניו.**

Moshe merited this radiance from 'the cave' when G-d 'placed' his hands on Moshe Rabbeinu's face. Radiance, according to this pshat is a reflection of and a reaction to an intense religious experience and of personal revelation. Besides the logic of this perspective it also maintains fidelity to the original pesukim in that the pasuk says that Moshe's face was transformed בדברו איתו - when G-d spoke with him.

There are three other pshatim that have always resonated with me. The Yalkut Shimoni in answering the question of מהיכן נטל - from where was the radiance taken from - answers that it came from the קימעה שבקולמוס, the ink left in the bottom of the pen was placed onto Moshe's face. One is left wondering what these tantalizing words mean - the ink left in the bottom of the pen?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh wrote that the ink in question is the letter 'י' that was left out of the word עניו. When Moshe in Parshas Beha'aloscha wrote about himself that וְהָאִישׁ מִנְּשָׂה עֵנוּ מֵאֵד his fundamental discomfort and humility didn't allow him to fully write the word עניו and he therefore took out the letter yud. This missing yud so to speak became his radiance.

There is something so beautiful about this image. Moshe saw himself as a kli through which HKB'H communicated to the world. That sense of just being a vessel without the ego running roughshod is what emanated from him upon his descent from Har Sinai.

I saw this year a different answer to the question of מהיכן נטל. The Yalkut Reuveini writes that this אור, this radiance, was a part of Moshe Rabbeinu from the time of his birth as is mentioned in the gemarah in Sotah that כְּשֶׁנִּזְלַד נִתְּמַלֵּא הַבַּיִת כְּלוּ אֹרֶה. That ohr says the Yalkut Reuveini was created during the ששת ימי בראשית and was ganuz (hidden) once Moshe had to interact with Pharaoh and was subsequently returned to him in full force before his descent from Har Sinai.

While one might question the dynamics of when and why this radiance both left Moshe and was then subsequently returned, the idea seems profoundly beautiful. Namely that man in a way is born with a true inner light. There are times in which that light is dimmed but in our finest moments that light is restored. There is something enormously reparative and redemptive about that image.

To some degree what these pshatim don't answer is why did these קרני עור only appear with the giving of the second luchos. Moshe's oneness with G-d in the מערה, his humility and natural radiance should have all been present and evident with the original pre-cheit ha'egel giving of the luchos? I would like to go back to the language of the קימעא שבקולמוס, the ink in the own to answer this question.

From the very first time I heard this language that the radiance came from the remaining ink, I was always led to one conclusion. Namely that the ink in the bottom of the pen was referring to Moshe Rabbeinu's reservoir of strength and inner fortitude. Moshe who never wanted the leadership role in the first place. Moshe who already by this time in Jewish History was subject to the complaints and the revolts that were to mark the years of sojourn. Moshe who found himself doing battle with HKB'H to save Bnei Yisroel from G-d's wrath. Moshe who saw and reacted to the presence of the eigel in the midst of sanctity of the camp of Israel. Moshe who sacrificed time with his own family to serve the greater good - this same Moshe managed to trudge back up the mountain and receive the luchos again. That seems like Moshe Rabbeinu tapping into the ink that remained in the bottom of the pen - which is the reservoir of strength, tolerance, faith, commitment, love and idealism that undoubtedly was depleted but never extinguished. This radiance most resolutely and clearly emerged only after cheit ha'egel. This reservoir of strength is what Moshe didn't even realize about himself לא ידע, but radiated from him and illuminated his very being. In a way it's the beauty of man's essence being wordlessly communicated to the world at large.

Do I know what lay behind the radiance of that righteous man in Tzfas? Of course not. What I do know is that the lesson of Moshe Rabbeinu is that man, whether it be through their hisbodedus with HKB'H, or through the natural state of their created soul, or through the genuine humility that comes with experience or through the tapping into reservoirs of fortitude and resilience can achieve genuine greatness, sanctity, and radiance even within the confines of life with all of its limitations and physicality. We should all be zoche to experience a taste of that in our own lifetimes.

Have a good Shabbos

R' Blass can be reached at blass@yu.edu