

Coverings, especially coverings of the face, are the theme of the hour in the Jewish calendar. This week we celebrated Purim. At the core of the holiday is the notion of hiddenness, or in rabbinic language “*hester panim*”. God never explicitly appears in the entire ten chapters of the *megillah*; and the holiday is celebrated through festive costumes which mask, or cover, our true selves. This notion of covering continues thematically in Parashat Ki Tissa. At the very end of the parashah, Moshe descends from Mount Sinai with a new set of tablets in hand. The Torah describes Moshe coming down with a radiant face, so radiant that the people cannot stand looking at him. Ultimately he uses some kind of face covering or veil to hide himself.

Let’s take a look at the verses.

(29) “So Moses came down from Mount Sinai.

And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets,

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 feared coming near him.”

These verses are perhaps most famous thanks to Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses, which portrays Moses with horns. You can see a photograph of that sculpture on this week’s Kol Sasson announcement page. Michelangelo based his depiction on the Vulgate, the Latin translation which mistakenly took “*karan*” to mean that Moses sprouted horns. I don’t want to get into the grammatical reasons that *karan* should not be translated as horns...so I hope you’ll take my word for it. And, enjoy the picture! Even though it’s grammatically problematic, the statue is an interesting midrash on our passage.

Let’s explore a few Jewish midrashim that address the question: Where did Moshe’s luminous face come from? I think it’s a particularly interesting question given that in the verses we just read the Torah didn’t directly tell us that Moshe’s face became radiant. Take a look again, you’ll notice the Torah only told us that his face was perceived as luminous, and that Moshe was unaware of the luminosity. The Torah omits the story of the genesis of this radiance, and this becomes fertile material for the midrash to fill in.

Rashi quotes two midrashim. The first appears in his comment on verse 29 “*ki karan*”:

From where did Moshe merit these majestic emanations? Our teachers taught: From the cave. When God passed God’s hand over Moshe’s face, as it was written, “and I will shield you with my hand.”

This interpretation, drawn from Midrash Tanhuma, suggests that Moshe’s radiant face came from a recent intense spiritual encounter with God. In the chapter before our passage, in chapter 33, Moshe had asked to see God’s glory--*hareini na et kevodecha*--Oh, let me behold Your presence! While God refused to grant Moshe permission to see God’s face, God did set up a special arrangement with Moshe: “Station yourself on the rock and as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”

This is a really mysterious, rich and yes anthropomorphic passage; certainly not one that I want to try to interpret. But according to the Midrash quoted in Rashi, it was this particular episode that changed Moshe and resulted in his luminous face. From God's obscuring hand, from not seeing God's face, Moshe's own face was imprinted with light. Perhaps you could even say that the intimacy Moshe shared with God in the cave resulted in a wounding experience--Moshe is marked, branded by fire.

This midrash connecting the episode in the cave to the luminous face is a midrash about the implications of intense spiritual experiences. An intense spiritual experience can and I suppose should leave a person changed. In the case of Moshe, this change had a striking physical aspect to it.

In Rashi's next comment, he quotes a different midrash, this time from the Sifrei. This Midrash takes the story in a different direction:

Come and see the power of sin.

Before the people sinned, what does the Torah say?

"Now the presence of God appeared before the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain"

And then the people were not afraid. But since they made the Golden Calf, even Moshe's radiant face made them quiver and shake.

This midrash recalls that back in Parashat Yitro, before the sin of the golden calf, the people were able to perceive the presence of God and watch all sorts of intense light shows that came with it. But the sin of the golden calf changed the people. Now they are in a weakened state, so much so that Moshe's luminous face is too much for them to bear. They recoil when they look at him.

I think it's possible to read this second midrash as suggesting that Moshe's face was actually luminous all along. Nothing about Moshe has changed. He looks just how he's always looked. It's just that now, post-sin, Moshe's radiance becomes an issue for the people. This reading is compelling insofar as it can explain why it's the perception of the radiance that is highlighted in verses 29 and 30--and not the radiance itself.

I like the way Rashi juxtaposes these two midrashim. According to the first midrash, our story is a story about Moshe. He's been through quite a lot, he is changed, and this is manifested in his newly luminous face. According to the second midrash, our story is a story about the people. They have been through quite a lot, they are changed, and this is expressed in their insecurity and fear when facing Moshe's spiritual stature.

It is certainly possible to harmonize the two midrashim, and perhaps Rashi assumes that we should. In that case, we'd say that the luminous face is new but the people's fear of it is also new, based on their new situation. However, it's also interesting, I think, to entertain the possibility that Rashi is presenting two midrashim that explain the luminosity in two contradicting ways, leaving us to choose which we find more compelling.