

'His Face Shone'

"Moses did not know the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them..." (Exod. 34:29-31).

After all the dramatic tensions of the previous five chapters, the closing passage of chapter 34 (see vv. 29-35) leaves us with some sense of reassurance. The idolatrous gold calf episode is over; the fury of the Lord has abated thanks to a brilliant display of diplomacy on the part of Moses; the smashed stone tablets have been refashioned and the Ten Commandments rewritten. The covenant between God and the people of Israel has survived a terrible test.

And now, as we breathe a sigh of relief, here emerges Moses, coming down Mt Sinai, aglow with the Lord's glory. What questions come to mind as you read 34:29-35? With the Jewish sages who have creatively pondered this text over the centuries, perhaps you find yourself wondering: Why is Moses unaware of his transfigured appearance? And why does it instill fear in the Israelites?

Recall that Moses has just spent forty days and forty nights in intense communication with the Lord, taking neither bread nor water (34:28). Through various creative interpretation, the Jewish sages comment on Moses' heightened spiritual state, including his humility. According to the *Or Hahayyim*,¹ so focused was Moses on the meaning of the stone tablets he held in his arms that, he presumed that the radiance was coming from the tablets—i.e., the light of the Torah.

But why would divine radiance reflected in a humble man cause the people to recoil? And why would Moses feel the need to cover his face?

For the great Torah scholar known as Rashi,² the Israelites' fear is a result of the sin of the gold calf. Before the calf, the people were able to stand in the presence of the Lord's glory (Exod. 24:17), yet now their conscience has been pricked and

they have trouble even looking into the face of an intermediary of that glory.

Yet Moses calls to them in a spirit of acceptance and reconciliation. Note the role of leaders in accepting this gesture. Aaron and the leaders among the Israelites draw close to Moses first. Then the people follow.

Further, the verses that deal with the 'veil' suggest a delicate discernment on the part of Moses. When speaking with the Lord and when communicating the divine will to the people, he allows the radiance upon his face to be seen by all. However, in everyday activities he covers his face so as not to distract and overpower the people who presumably are not in the same spiritual 'space' as he. Moses is endowed with an exceptional gift, but he is discerning in how he uses that gift for the benefit of the people.

What can this creative view of Moses' decision to veil/unveil teach us about expressing our own God-given gifts? Are there times when it is wiser to 'tone down' our zeal and enthusiasm out of sensitivity to others? Then again, bold expression of our values is essential to the life of faith. How do you live this tension?

Continue to ponder Moses' radiance. For instance, count the number of times 'Moses' is repeated (11x in the Hebrew; 3x in the final verse). Rashi notes that repetition of a name in a single verse signals a special affection for the one named. Do you sense an affection for Moses building as this chapter draws to a close?

Reflect, too, on how Jewish interpretation of this biblical scene can sensitize your ears to the Gospel story of Jesus transfigured (Mt 17:1-13). •

1. Or Ha-hayyim: Torah commentary by the Moroccan Jewish scholar Hayyim Ibn Attar (1696-1743).

2. Rashi: 11th c., France.

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Shemos* (New York, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.

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