

PARASHAS KI SISA

Dazzled by the Light

A strange thing happened after Moses brought down the second set of tablets from Mount Sinai. The people took one glance at him, and they had to turn away. His face had begun to glow with a transcendent celestial light and with such intensity that the people could not bear to look at him. It was like looking directly at the sun. From that point on, Moses had to drape his face with a mask after he came among the people, taking it off only when he entered the Tabernacle to speak with the Almighty.

The Talmud explains that this incandescent radiance was a manifestation of the Divine Presence which had transformed his very essence. His spiritual side had become so dominant over his material side that his soul, the divine spark within him, shone out unfiltered and interrupted by any material barriers.

Some of the commentators find this development rather puzzling. When Moses brought down the first set of tablets, we find no mention of any increased luminescence of Moses's face. Only after he saw the corruption of the golden calf-idol and smashed the first tablets do we find that his face took on this heightened illumination. Why was this so?

The commentators explain that the illumination actually began much earlier. Long before Moses returned with the second set of tablets, he had already reached the exalted spiritual level reflected in his resplendent countenance. Earlier, however, the people had no problem looking at his face, because they themselves were on an exalted spiritual level.

When a person who spends most of his time in a dark room suddenly steps out into the sunlight he has to cover his eyes immediately, because he cannot tolerate the bright sunlight. But a person who spends his time in a brilliantly lit room can step into the sunlight with ease. Since he is accustomed to light, he can tolerate a greater light.

Before the sin of the golden calf, the people were accustomed to a very high level of spiritual light, and therefore, they were not blinded by the supernal light of Moses's face. But after they sinned, their spiritual light was greatly dimmed, and they became accustomed to living in spiritual darkness. Therefore, when they beheld the luminous face of Moses, they had no choice but to turn away.

Two young men went to see a famous sage who lived in a distant town. They had heard a great deal about the sage, and they were both eager to hear his words of wisdom and ask his blessing.

Finally, they arrived in the town where the sage lived. They took a room in the hotel and immediately went to seek an audience with the sage.

After a short wait, the two young men were shown into the audience room of the sage. He was very old and feeble, but his eyes were sharp and penetrating, and his face glowed with holiness and purity.

He asked the two young men to sit down and began to speak with them. One young man had gone pale when he saw the sage. When the sage spoke to him, he couldn't manage more than a stammer, and his face grew beet-red. The other young man, however, was his poised and comfortable self.

After they left, the first young man said to his friend, "I don't understand it. How come you were so comfortable with the sage, while I was frightened out of my wits?"

One of the sage's attendants standing nearby overheard the question.

"It happens all the time, my good fellow," he said. "People who are not quite what they should be are always thunderstruck by the appearance of the sage. They find his holiness too dazzling to behold. If that's how you reacted, I would suggest you straighten out your life right away."

In our own lives, we can measure our spiritual level by our reaction to other people of great spirituality. If we feel at ease in their company and are even drawn to them, our own innate spirituality is probably at a high level as well. But if they make us feel even vaguely uncomfortable, we should take it as a clear sign that we have become a little too materialistic and that it is time to focus on raising the level of our own spirituality.