**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**MIDRASH ON THE PARASHA**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,   
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,   
who have left us in the past 7 years.   
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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**Parashat Ki Tisa:**

**“The Skin of Moshe’s Face Sent Forth Beams”**

**“An Object in Which They Could Have Faith”**

**The Sin of the Golden Calf and its Aftermath**

The Israelites had been promised that something visible would descend on them from God which they could follow, as they followed the pillars of cloud and fire when they departed from Egypt. This they pointed out, and turned to it, praising it, and worshipping God in its presence…

They waited for Moshe's return clad in the same apparel in which they had witnessed the drama on Sinai, without removing their jewels or changing their clothes, remaining just as he left them, expecting every moment to see him return. He, however, tarried forty days, although he had not provided himself with food, having only left them with the intention of returning the same day.

An evil spirit overpowered a portion of the people, and they began to divide into parties and factions. Many views and opinions were expressed, till at last some decided to do like the other nations, and seek an object in which they could have faith, without, however, prejudicing the supremacy of Him who had brought them out of Egypt. On the contrary, this was to be something to which they could point when relating the wonders of God… (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, I, 97)

In this famous passag*e*, Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi defends what the Jewish people do in the Sin of the Golden Calf, arguing that they merely surrender to the need to cling to some tangible element in their service of God, in a period during which all of humanity worships idols. Moshe's "disappearance" for forty days and forty nights is difficult, challenging and unexpected, and the people do not withstand the test. Instead, they regress to the visible, the familiar and the comfortable — in the form of the Golden Calf.

Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi points out that it is not only Moshe's absence, but rather the lack of any visual sign of God's presence in the camp that brings the people to create an alternate representation, "something visible that would descend on them from God which they could follow, as they followed the pillars of cloud and fire when they departed from Egypt."

Against this background, it should be noted that twice over the course of the story of the Sin of the Golden Calf in *Parashat Ki Tisa*, the Torah describes how Moshe is seen by the people after the sin, and in each of the descriptions there is a different divine mark.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The first description appears after the initial response to the sin, which includes killing the worshippers of the Calf and having the survivors remove the ornaments that they had received at Mount Sinai; it mentions their seeing the pillar of cloud that descends and stands at the door of the tent, speaking to Moshe outside the camp (*Shemot* 33:1-6).

The second description appears in the story of Moshe's descent from the mountain with the Second Tablets on Yom Kippur,[[2]](#footnote-2) and it focuses on Moshe's face:

And it came to pass, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in Moshe's hand, when he came down from the mountain, that Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him. And when Aharon and all the Israelites saw Moshe, behold, the skin of his face sent forth beams; and they were afraid to come near to him.

And Moshe called to them; and Aharon and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moshe spoke to them. And afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

And when Moshe had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But when Moshe went in before the Lord that He might speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out; and he came out; and he spoke to the Israelites that which he was commanded. And the Israelites saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face sent forth beams; and Moshe put the veil back upon his face, until he went in to speak with Him. (*Shemot* 34:29-35)

The Torah addresses the need that led to the Sin of the Golden Calf, showing how the need is fulfilled by way of Moshe's appearance after the sin. The three-time repetition of the term "sent forth beams" and the conclusion of *Parashat Ki Tisa* with this matter point to its importance and significance for the people.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this *shiur*, we will focus on the matter of Moshe's facial radiance, in the wake of the words of the Sages in Midrashic literature across the generations.

**Tannaim: Horns and Splendor**

At the end of the Jewish people’s fortieth year in the wilderness, in God's command to Moshe to prepare Yehoshua as his successor, it is stated: "And you shall put of your splendor upon him, that all the congregation of the Israelites may hearken" (*Bamidbar* 27:20). A Tannaitic *midrash* draws a connection between the splendor mentioned in this verse and the beaming of Moshe's face:

"And you shall put of your splendor upon him” — of the splendor that was given to you at Mount Sinai.

As it is stated: "And the Israelites saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face sent forth beams" (*Shemot* 34:35).

This teaches that rays went out from Moshe's face like the rays that go out from the orb of the sun.

As it is stated (*Chavakuk* 3:4): "And a brightness appears as the light; rays has He at His side." (*Sifrei Zuta* 27, 20)

The root *kuf-reish-nun* in *Tanakh* refers to an animal's horn, but it is often employed metaphorically: "And He will give strength to his king, and exalt the horn of His anointed" (I *Shemuel* 2:10). It may denote success and overcoming difficulty — or the lack thereof: "The horn of Moav is cut off, and its arm is broken, says the Lord" (*Yirmeyahu* 48:25).[[4]](#footnote-4) The verse that is brought from *Chavakuk* not only draws an explicit connection between horns and light, but also describes God's revelation at the Giving of the Torah in context:

God comes from Teiman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His splendor covers the heaven, and the earth is full of His praise. And a brightness appears as the light; rays has He as His side; and there is the hiding of His power. (*Chavakuk* 3:3-4).

Splendor appears in *Tanakh* with respect to the heavens: "His splendor covers the heaven."[[5]](#footnote-5) The *derasha* explains the latter clause of the verse "Rays has He at His side" as relating to the giving of the rays of splendor from God's hand to Moshe. The wording of the *derasha*, "that rays went out from Moshe's face like the rays that go out from the orb of the sun," relates to the feature shared by both the horns of an animal and the beams of the sun, that they issue forth and go out. The beaming of Moshe's face results from the fact that God grants him an element of His own splendor at the Giving of the Torah.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, the entire *derasha* reflects what is related in *Parashat Ki Tisa.*

According to what has been stated here, the radiance of Moshe's face expresses a sublime Divine dimension which he merits when he ascends on high, to the angelic realm. The Jewish people’s initial reaction to Moshe's face is fear.

The *Sifrei* cites the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who sees in their response an expression of their spiritual decline in the wake of the Sin of the Golden Calf:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Come and see how harsh is the power of sin.

For until they stretched their hands forth to sin, what is said about them?

"And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire" (*Shemot* 24:17), but they neither feared nor trembled.

After they stretched forth their hands to sin, what is said about them?

"And when Aharon and all the Israelites saw Moshe, behold, the skin of his face sent forth beams; and they were afraid to come near to him" (*Shemot* 34:30). (*Sifrei, Naso* 1)

The Jewish people’s spiritual level at the time of the Giving of the Torah is like that of Adam and Chava in the Garden of Eden before they eat of the Tree of Knowledge, when they could stand in the presence of God in a material world. After the sin, even a slight revelation of the *Shekhina —* in the radiance of Moshe's face — arouses fear.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The Midrash of Eretz Israel**

Let us examine the words of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel regarding the beaming of Moshe's face:

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi:

Moshe did not look upon the *Shekhina*, but he derived benefit from the *Shekhina*.

He did not look at the *Shekhina*, as it is stated: "And Moshe hid his face, [for he was afraid to look upon God]" (*Shemot* 3:6).

But he derived benefit from the *Shekhina*, as it is stated: "Moshe knew not that that the skin of his face sent forth beams.”

In reward for "And Moshe hid his face," he merited: "And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face" (*Shemot* 33:11).

In reward for "for he was afraid," he merited: "And they were afraid to come near to him" (*Shemot* 34:30).

In reward for "to look [upon God], he merited "And the similitude of the Lord does he behold" (*Bamidbar* 12:8).

Nadav and Avihu looked upon the *Shekhina*, but they derived no benefit from the *Shekhina.* (*Vayikra Rabba* 20, 10)

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin, a fourth-generation Amora and aggadic master of Eretz Israel, as well as a disciple of Rabbi Levi, points out a double contrast between Moshe's behavior and that of Nadav and Avihu at the time of the revelation at Mount Sinai, and between looking upon the *Shekhina* and the capacity to derive benefit from it.

"Moshe did not look upon the *Shekhina*, but he derived benefit from the *Shekhina…* Nadav and Avihu looked upon the *Shekhina*, but they derived no benefit from the *Shekhina*." To "look upon" relates to external observation; one who takes a quick look (with the sense of vision, or metaphorically, with superficial contemplation) does not merit truly drawing close to God at a time of revelation, and therefore the sons of Aharon do not derive benefit from the *Shekhina*. In contrast, Moshe, who understands that the revelation is beyond ordinary human perception, merits true closeness.

In addition, Rabbi Yehoshua expands upon the proportionality that prevails between Moshe's behavior at the Burning Bush and the lofty level that he merits when he ascends on high to receive the Torah. This symmetry finds expression in the Torah's wording in connection with Moshe: “hid his face” — “face to face;” “he was afraid” — “they were afraid to come near to him;” “to look upon God” — “and the similitude of the Lord does he behold.” It may be suggested that the symmetry comes to emphasize the magnitude of Moshe's humility in contrast to the arrogance of Nadav and Avihu.

Moshe's reward, as it appears in this part of the *derasha*, finds expression on three planes: the magnitude of his closeness to God, the people's reaction to his elevated level (its being outwardly visible) and his constant devotion. The radiance of his face relates to the second plane: "And when Aharon and all the Israelites saw Moshe, behold, the skin of his face sent forth beams; and they were afraid to come near to him." However, the radiance itself is not a reward, but rather something that brings about his reward. In the first part of the *derasha* ("Moshe did not look upon the *Shekhina*…"), the beaming of Moshe's face is an outward sign of his closeness to God: "And it came to pass, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in Moshe's hand, when he came down from the mountain, that Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him." Here too the *derasha* does not define his beaming face as a reward, but as a consequence of Moshe's elevated standing.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This *derasha* appears to reflect an approach that sees visual appearance as an expression of inner essence. Thus, the rays of light that issue forth from Moshe's face are a reflection of his being on the mountain forty days and forty nights.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This sign of a Divine level among the people is presented in another source from Eretz Israel as one of the hallmarks of the spiritual superiority of the Israelites:

"He has cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel" (*Eikha* 2:3).

There are ten horns: the horn of Avraham, the horn of Yitzchak, the horn of Yosef, the horn of Moshe, the horn of the Torah, the horn of the priesthood, the horn of the Levites, the horn of prophecy, the horn of the Temple, the horn of Israel, and some say the horn of the Messiah.

The horn of Avraham, as it is stated: "My well-beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill (*keren ben shemen*)" (*Yeshayahu* 5:1). The horn of Yitzchak, as it is stated: "A ram caught in the thicket by his horns" (*Bereishit* 22:13). The horn of Yosef, as it is stated: "And his horns are the horns of the wild ox" (*Devarim* 33:17). The horn of Moshe, as it is written: "That the skin of his face sent forth beams (*karan*)" (*Shemot* 34:29).

And they were all placed on the head of Israel, but when they sinned, it was removed from them. This is what is stated: "He has cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel." And it was given to the nations of the world…

Nevertheless, when Israel will repent, the Holy One, blessed be He, will restore them to their place. This is what is stated: "All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off; but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up" (*Tehillim* 75:11) — the horns that the Righteous One of the world cut off. When will He restore them to their place? When the Holy One, blessed be He, will raise the horn of His anointed one, as it is written: "And He will give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed" (I *Shemuel* 2:10). (*Eikha Rabba* 2, 6)

**The Late Midrash**

In the *Tanchuma* literature — *Tanchuma* (Buber), the printed *Tanchuma*, the second half of *Shemot Rabba* and *Devarim Rabba* — we find two things that are different from the Midrash of Eretz Israel regarding the radiance of Moshe's face.

First, in this literature, the beaming of Moshe's face is described as a reward:

"At that time the Lord said to me: Hew you two tables of stone like the first" (*Devarim* 10:1).

Halakha: If a man of Israel betroths a woman, who must pay the fee for the deed of betrothal?

Thus taught the Sages: A deed of betrothal or marriage may only be written with the agreement of both parties, and the groom pays the fee.

From where do we learn this? From the Holy One, blessed be He, who betrothed Israel at Sinai.

As it is written: "And the Lord said to Moshe, Go to the people" (*Shemot* 19:10).

Who transcribed the matter?

Moshe, as it is written: "And Moshe wrote this Torah" (*Devarim* 31:9).

And what reward did the Holy One, blessed be He, give him?

The splendor of his face, as it is written: "That Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams" (*Shemot* 34:29). (*Devarim Rabba, Eikev* 12)[[10]](#footnote-10)

A second matter of concern dealt with in the *Tanchuma* literature is a clarification of the source of the radiance of Moshe's face:

"And it came to pass, when Moshe came down from Mount Sinai… that Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams" (*Shemot* 34:29).

From where did Moshe take the beams of splendor?

Our Rabbis said: From the cave (*me’ara*), as it is stated: "And it shall come to pass, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock" (*Shemot* 33:22).

Rabbi Berekhya said: From the Tablets.

Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-nasi] said: The Tablets were six handbreadths in length and three handbreadths in width. Moshe held two handbreadths, and the Holy One, blessed be He, held two handbreadths, and there were two handbreadths between them. From there Moshe took the beams of splendor.

Rabbi Yehuda bar Nechemya said: When Moshe wrote the Torah, some [of the ink] was left in the pen, and he passed it over his head, and from there were made the beams of splendor, "that Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams." (*Midrash Tanchuma* [Buber], *Ki Tisa*, 20)

There are three opinions in the *Tanchuma*: the view of the Sages, the view of Rabbi Berekhya, and the view of Rabbi Yehuda bar Nechemya.[[11]](#footnote-11)The first view relates to what happened at the cleft in the rock, where Moshe merits a unique revelation:

And the Lord said: Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen. (*Shemot* 33:21-23)

The Sages seem to connect the radiance of Moshe's face to his dedication to the welfare of the Israelites, for which he merits greater apprehension of God's ways. Rabbi Berekhya connects the source of the radiance of Moshe's face to the Tablets. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi's statement illustrates the special closeness that was created between God and Moshe, and the role of the Tablets as the conduit through which the Divine Torah passes into the hands of Israel.

These two opinions in the *Tanchuma* are explained by the Maggid of Kozhnitz, Rabbi Yisrael Hopstein of Kozhnitz (beginning of the nineteenth century) in his commentary to the Torah, *Avodat Yisrael,* on *Parashat Ki Tisa*:

"That the skin of his face sent forth beams." In the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 47, 6): From where did Moshe merit the beams of splendor? Our Rabbis said: From the cave. Rabbi Berekhya Ha-kohen said in the name of Rabbi Shemuel: The tablets were six handbreadths in length and three handbreadths in width. Moshe held two handbreadths, and the *Shekhina* held two handbreadths, and there were two handbreadths between them. From there Moshe took the beams of splendor. Thus far the Midrash.

What this means is that a cave is a term of connection, by way of cleaving to and joining with the Creator… And Rabbi Berekhya said that the tablets were six handbreadths in length… We know that the Torah was given to Moshe… that he was to teach to the Israelites. But the root of the Torah that could not be revealed remained before Him on high, including all the new interpretations to be proposed by distinguished scholars.

This is what is referred to as the two handbreadths in the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, and two handbreadths in Moshe's hands. All the new interpretations of the Torah proposed by distinguished scholars and the righteous of every generation are drawn by the soul of Moshe that illuminates every righteous person. This is called the two handbreadths in between them, and from there Moshe took the beams of splendor. For through him, all the novel insights into the Torah are revealed to the righteous of every generation.

The two handbreadths in the middle, that are held neither by God nor by Moshe, symbolize the novel Torah insights that the Israelites will propose over the generations. The Maggid of Kozhnitz attributes the beams of splendour merited by Moshe to these two handbreadths, explaining the wording of the Midrash, "from there Moshe took the beams of splendor," as referring to these two handbreadths.

The third opinion brought in the Midrash, that of Rabbi Yehuda bar Nechemya, relates to the act of writing the Torah, and to the diversion of Moshe's attention while doing so.

The Midrash describes Moshe's climactic moments on Mount Sinai: In his understanding of God's ways in the wake of his devotion to the welfare of the Israelites, in his receiving the Tablets from the hands of God in order to pass them on to Israel, and in his act of writing the Torah.

The three views describe contact made with Moshe's body: "And I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by;" holding the Tablets "together" with God; and the writing of the Torah, when Moshe's hand not only bears the Torah, but itself creates the written Torah which Israel will be able to study, and even his head becomes a place where he can wipe off the extra ink.

Thus, these three opinions relate to Moshe's absolute devotion as a go-between working for the sake of the Israelites, which finds expression in his very body.

Over the course of this *shiur,* we reviewed the appearances of the radiance of Moshe's skin in Midrashic literature across the generations. We began by noting the people's need for Moshe's radiant face, as it follows from the plain sense of the verses, and we conclude the *shiur* on the same note.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. This echoes the words of the people to Aharon (*Shemot* 32:1):

   And when the people saw that Moshe delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aharon, and said to him: Up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moshe, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the commentary of R. Ovadya Seforno to *Shemot* 24:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This invokes the terminology of the *mitzva* of appearing before God, told here (34:23-24) to Moshe:

   Three times in the year shall all your males be seen before the Lord God… neither shall any man covet your land, when you go up to be seen before the Lord your God three times in the year.

   This commandment relates to the complex dimension of seeing, that the Israelites not only see, but primarily are seen by God. It should be noted that the motif of seeing runs through the entire account of the sin of the Golden Calf:

   * “And when the people **saw** that Moshe delayed to come" (32:1)
   * "And when Aharon **saw** this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said: Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord" (32:5)
   * "I have **seen** this people" (32:9)
   * "And it came to pass, as soon as he came near the camp, that he **saw** the calf" (32:19)
   * "And when Moshe **saw** that the people were broken loose" (32:25)
   * "And it came to pass, when Moshe went out into the Tent, that all the people… **looked** after Moshe" (33:8)
   * "And when all the people **saw** the pillar of cloud stand at the door of the Tent" (33:10)
   * "And he said: **Let me see**, I pray You, Your glory… And He said: You cannot **see** My face… and you shall **see** My back; but My face shall not be **seen**" (33:18-22)
   * "And He said: Behold, I make a covenant; before all your people… and all the people among which you are shall **see** the work of the Lord that I am about to do with you, that it is tremendous" (34:10)
   * "And when Aharon and all the Israelites **saw** Moses, behold, the skin of his face sent forth beams; and they were afraid to come near to him… And the Israelites **saw** the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe's face sent forth beams; and Moshe put the veil back upon his face" (34:30-35)

   See also *Shem mi-Shemuel,* *Pekudei* 5721, who expands upon the significance of the radiance of Moshe's face for the Israelites, based on *Shemot Rabba* 33, 1:

   It is explicit that the radiance of Moshe's face was a reward for brokering the acquisition acquired by Israel. It is obvious that the acquisition itself is greater than the brokerage fee. Therefore, when they saw the radiance of Moshe's face, which was the brokerage fee, they understood the great value of the acquisition itself acquired by Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the source of the famous mistake made by Michelangelo, who sculpted the figure of Moshe with horns. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. "Splendor" is associated with the heavens in the following verses as well: "O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth! You have set Your splendor upon the heavens" (*Tehillim* 8:2); "And He has lifted up a horn for His people, a praise for all His saints, even for the Israelites, a people near unto Him" (*Tehillim* 148:14). See also *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 8, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The phrase *hod ve-hadar*, "splendor and beauty," is found in *Tanakh* in several places in reference to God: "Splendor and beauty are before Him; strength and majesty are in His sanctuary" (*Tehillim* 96:6); "Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and beauty" (*Tehillim* 104:1); "His work is splendor and beauty; and His righteousness endures forever" (*Tehillim* 111:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See the parallel passage in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, 5, “*Ha-chodesh ha-zeh*,” where the comparison to Adam is explicit. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Proof that the Amoraim do not view the radiance of Moshe's face as a reward can be adduced from the statement in the name of Rabbi Chanina on BT *Shabbat* 10b: "One who gives a gift to his fellow need not inform him, as it is stated: 'Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This notion is typical of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel. See, for example, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 4, 4. It seems that this can be attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai; see *Sifrei, Devarim* 47. Compare also to another statement of Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin in *Midrash Zuta, Kohelet*, no. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also *Shemot Rabba* 33, 1:

    “For I give you good doctrine; forsake you not my teaching” (*Mishlei* 4:2)… A person might acquire something, but the people do not know what it is. But from the brokerage fee, it becomes known what he acquired. So the Torah, people do not know what it is, other than from the fee taken by Moshe, as it is stated: “Moshe knew not that the skin of his face sent forth beams while He talked with him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Warsaw edition of the *Tanchuma* (*Ki Tisa* 30, 7) includes another statement: "And some say that when the Holy One, blessed be He, taught him Torah, he took the beams of splendor from the sparks that issued forth from the mouth of the *Shekhina*." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)