

Moshe's Finest Hour

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Parshat Ki Tisa contains a strange, even paradoxical phenomenon. Moshe is privy to a vision of the Almighty which eclipses anything even he has previously experienced, precisely at the moment when the Jewish people have plunged to the spiritual abyss in the wake of the Golden Calf. The leader of the Jewish people has reached the outer boundaries of human intimacy with the Divine, *deveikut ba-Hashem*, while the people have descended to the nadir of their collective spiritual existence. In light of the rabbinic tradition that Moshe did not receive prophecy when the Jewish people were in a state of estrangement from the Almighty, this dichotomy between Moshe's spiritual ascent and the people's parallel descent is a startling phenomenon.

It seems to me that if we want to understand this conundrum, we might do well to examine a parallel question which the Talmud poses regarding Aharon. Why is it, the Talmud inquires, that Aharon merited carrying the Choshen HaMishpat over his heart? In essence, what made Aharon the right man to be Kohen Gadol? The Talmud replies, in the name of R. Milai, that Aharon earned the right to wear the *choshen*, for when Aharon was told by God that he had been bypassed in favor of his younger brother to be the leader of the Jewish people, he was not embittered, but on the contrary, was very happy for Moshe. If almost all of the older siblings in Sefer Bereishit were petty and selfish, Aharon was, heroically, gracious and selfless in accepting being displaced by his younger brother.

In the wake of the Golden Calf, the Almighty offers to destroy the Jewish people (Aharon included), and build anew from Moshe. Moshe, had he accepted the deal, would have not only been the leader who took the Jews out of Egypt, but, in addition, all of the Patriarchs rolled into one. He would have led his progeny triumphantly into Israel, and, by definition, he would have secured the place of his family in the leadership of the Jewish people for all generations. It was, from Moshe's personal point of view, the ultimate offer.

Moshe, as we know, rejects the offer out of hand. Like his brother before him, he is able to see beyond himself. The full measure of sacrifice inherent in this choice can hardly be overstated: Moshe would eventually lose his ticket to Israel, and Moshe's own children fade into spiritual oblivion, and even worse. Yet, ironically, in turning down the keys to the kingdom, Moshe also comes closer to God than he ever has before. In looking beyond himself, Moshe, like Aharon, achieves a new degree of closeness to God.

The fact that both Moshe and Aharon earn a certain form of closeness to God as a result of acts of selflessness seems appropriate. For, God himself has no needs, and the creation of the world

itself was an act of inexplicable, unbounded kindness, a manifestation of *rav chessed*. When people act selflessly, as Moshe and Aharon did, they are acting like God, and they become, *eo ipso*, closer to God. Aharon gets to enter the most sacred space, and Moshe merits a vision even he, at his rarified plane, never had before.

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In truth, Moshe's selflessness reflects yet another dimension of closeness to the Almighty. If the Almighty could have, in the technical sense, fulfilled his promise to the Patriarchs to redeem their descendents by building through Moshe, then Moshe has leverage, so to speak, over God, strange as that may sound. If Moshe refuses God's offer, God will, as it were, be compelled to forgive the Jewish people, for he has no other mechanism through which to fulfill his oath to the Patriarchs to bring their descendents into the Land of Israel.

Yet, Moshe refuses the offer in a very particular way, asking God to 'erase' him from his book. This, of course, is a borrowed line; Moshe took this line from the Almighty himself. When the Almighty wishes to restore peace to warring spouses, He too, offers the erasure of His name, which is a critical part of the Sotah process.

Moshe, having just completed mastering the entire Torah during the forty day period of immersion on Sinai, was offering the erasure of his own name so the two spouses, God and the Jewish people, might be reunited. In fact, the entire narrative of the aftermath of the Calf is replete with textual parallels to the Sotah protocols; most obviously, the fact that Moshe compels the Jewish people suspected of infidelity to the Almighty to drink of the waters of the Calf, as a Sotah woman under similar suspicion would be compelled to do.

In this sense, Moshe was fulfilling the ultimate commandment with respect to drawing close to God, namely, *v'balachta b'derachav, imitatio dei*. If God offers the erasure of his name to restore harmony amongst spouses, then, so too, must man.

Thus, even as the Jewish people sink to the spiritual depths, Moshe rises to Divine like stature, achieving his finest hour. Small wonder, then, that he achieves his most direct vision of the Almighty at that very moment.

Of course, in so doing, Moshe not only achieved the maximal degree of access to the Almighty any human being might possibly achieve, but, ever the faithful shepherd, forestalled catastrophe, and enabled the Jewish people to begin their own road to redemption and rehabilitation.