

Ki Tisa

Moshe's Finest Hour

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's status was derived strictly for the sake of the Jewish people, this dichotomy between Moshe's spiritual ascent and the people's parallel descent is a startling phenomenon¹.

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 Talmud² 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.

¹ See Talmud Bavli Brachot 32a. See also Rashi to VaYikra 1:1 s.v. lemor; Rashi Devarim 2:16 s.v. VaYehi. While the general thrust of all three sources clearly indicates that Moshe's status and access to the Divine was linked to his role as intermediary between the Almighty and His people, there are subtleties in the formulations of these three sources. The first indicates that Moshe's *gedulah*, perhaps his leadership status, was derived from his role vis a vis the people, *kelum natati licha gedulah ela bishvil Yisrael*. The latter two sources, by contrast, are focused on Moshe's prophetic status. Differentiating between these two sources, Rashi in VaYikra connotes that Moshe did not receive any prophecy at all for the thirty eight years between the chet ha-Meraglim and the final year of the Jewish sojourn in the desert, while Rashi in Devarim indicates that while prophecy may have continued, the affectionate, direct, and serene quality to that prophecy no longer existed, *lo nityached imo ba-dibbur b'lashon chibah, panim el panim, v'yishuv ha'da'at*.

² Shabbat 139a.

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 God³.

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 is vested in the *choshen*, and Moshe merits a vision even he, at his rarified plane, never had before.

II.

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 drink of the waters of the Calf, as a Sotah woman under similar suspicion would be compelled to do.

³ Chazal, of course, maintained that the Almighty could not have been more pleased that Moshe 'defeated' Him, and triumphed in his efforts to spare the Jewish people. See Talmud Bavli Pesachim 119a.

In this sense, Moshe was fulfilling the ultimate commandment with respect to drawing close to God, namely, *v'halachta 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 unprecedented heights, 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.

III.

Despite Moshe's heroic efforts on behalf of the people, there is still a tragic coda to the *egel* narrative. Not once do any members of the Jewish people verbalize, or otherwise demonstrate, any gratitude whatsoever to Moshe for rescuing them from the abyss.

On the contrary, Rashi later observes⁴, on the basis of the Sifrei, that Moshe deliberately curtailed his prayer for his beloved *tzara'at* stricken sister, Miriam, to a mere five words, on account of the concern that the Jewish people would accuse him of nepotism, failing to recognize that he prayed on their behalf for no fewer than forty days or forty nights.

Tragically, the post *egel* period is defined by still further distance between Moshe and the people that He labored on whose behalf he was prepared to sacrifice so much. The most concrete manifestation of this distance is the actual recoiling of the people from Moshe's newly radiant countenance, and the introduction of the *masveh*, the veil which would occlude Moshe's face from the people anytime he was not directly involved in teaching Torah.

In a broader sense, however, there is a sense of alienation. The Torah speaks of the Jewish people gazing from afar as Moshe entered the *ohel* to rendezvous with the Divine presence⁵. While some streams within Chazal recognized within this gesture a measure of deep respect, others perceived it as an indication of deep resentment and mistrust, as various members of the camp, astonishingly, accused Moshe of exploiting the Jewish people⁶.

⁴ Rashi to BeMidbar 12:13 s.v. *refa na lah*. C.f. Talmud Bavli Berakhot 34a. See also Rashi's first opinion, ad loc. in which Moshe's concern was portrayed as related to the Jewish people doubting the very efficacy of prayer itself. One wonders whether these lingering doubts themselves contributed to the Jewish people's profound failure to appreciate the extent to which Moshe's prayers and encounter with the Almighty saved them.

⁵ Shemot 33:8, *v'hibitu acharei Moshe ad bo'o ha'ohela*.

⁶ See, for example, Talmud Yerushalmi Bikkurim 11:2

Further evidence of this transition may be found in the details of the second giving of the Torah. Moshe is told that even as he ascends the mountain, *v'ish lo ya'aleh imach*⁷, no one is able to ascend with him. Even if, in the first giving of the Torah one could enter Moshe's actual space, *mechitzah bifei atzmo*, Aharon, and others, all made their way to certain spaces⁸. Here, the image of Moshe ascending alone is paradigmatic of the growing gap between Moshe and the rest of the people.

Moshe's circle, as it were, narrows further, and, the conclusion of this section of narrative with Yehoshua's presence, "never straying from the tent"⁹ is a clear indication of the significance of the emergence of that paradigmatic rebbe-talmid relationship, which presages, decades hence, the first transition of Torah leadership¹⁰.

Needless to say, the tragic failure of the people to recognize Moshe's self-sacrifice on their behalf would never have crossed the mind, let alone exerted even the slightest impact, on the heroic actions of the most humble of all men to walk the face of the earth.

Moshe, unquestionably, set the standard of *mesirut nefesh* as sine qua non for all Torah leadership, and was actually fulfilling the mandate he and Aharon had been given in Egypt, *va'yetzavem el Benei Yisrael*- indefatigable service to the people irrespective of their conduct¹¹, or level of gratitude or appreciation.

Rambam codifies¹² Moshe's self-sacrificial conduct as fully normative for all subsequent Torah leadership, further cementing Moshe's historical legacy as halakhic-national leader par excellence, in the darkest of hours.

⁷ Shemot 34:3, with Ramban ad loc.

⁸ Rashi Shemot 19:24 on the basis of Mekhilta.

⁹ Shemot 33:11.

¹⁰ See Talmud Bavli Berachot 63b, which precisely captures this allusion to the transition of leadership between Moshe and Yehoshua.

¹¹ Shemot Rabbah 7:3 "*banai sarvanim hem, ragzanim hem, tarchanim hem, al minat ken tihiyu mekablim aleichem she'yihiyu mekalilim etchem, she'yihiyu mesaklim etchem ba'avanim.*"

¹² Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Sanhedrin 25:1-2. The degree to which Rambam links the ethos of national or even communal leadership to Moshe's personal conduct is absolutely striking, as he references Moshe three times within one halakha, and further references anavah as a defining attribute of halakhic leader, an inescapable reference to Moshe.