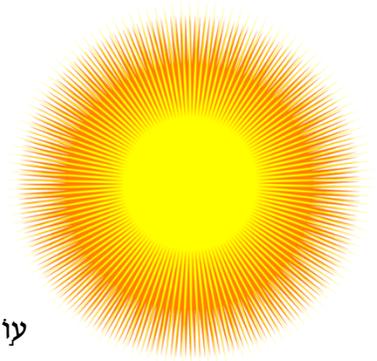




The Parsha in Practice

Your Camera is Always On

One of the remarkable moments in this Parsha is what we find when Moshe descends from the mountaintop after a second set of forty days and nights receiving the luchot. When he descends, the pasuk describes how remarkably:



שמות פרק לד (כט) וַיְהִי בִרְדַת מֹשֶׁה מֵהַר סִינַי וּשְׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִן־הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אִתּוֹ: (ל) וַיֵּרָא אֹהֶרָן וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְהֵנָּה קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו וַיִּירְאוּ מִגִּשְׁתֹּת אֵלָיו:

So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him.

Moshe's face had a radiance that intimidated all who saw him. The pesukim ultimately describe how Moshe would cover his face so that this glow would not intimidate others.

It is interesting to note that Moshe waits until after he is done teaching the Bnei Yisrael before he begins to wear the covering. Why didn't he make his students more comfortable while he was teaching them? Wouldn't a mask over his face have relaxed this intense moment of fear and intimidation?

I think there are a variety of messages in this first "shining" example of a class given by Moshe Rabeinu to the people that speak to the nuances that are often involved in educating or influencing others. R' Moshe Feinstein suggests that there is an important lesson here. The connection that is required between the teacher and student is such that it will not tolerate any sort of visual separation. The student must see the face of the teacher and the teacher must be able to see the face of the student.

This might sound like a screed against keeping our cameras off during Zoom shiurim, but there's more to it than that. At times, whether a student understands a lesson can be seen in an almost imperceptible look, or micro-expression of confusion. A teacher might react by repeating the point, making eye contact with the student, and waiting until the expression changes to one of understanding.

Occasionally, a student's look might not be one of confusion, but one of dismissiveness. Maybe there is a raw nerve that the lesson has touched or a loose string that it has unraveled for the student. The teacher needs to be able to see the reaction and adapt their teaching to it. Both of these experiences are lost when the view between student and teacher is obstructed.

The student should be able to observe the teacher as well. The energies and expressions involved in a lesson often make up the core of the message. Is this a joyous teaching? Is it exciting? Or is it serious and reflective? Capturing the emotional content of the curriculum is very difficult without a view of the teacher.

These lessons notwithstanding, perhaps the most important educational lesson we learn from this story is from the fact that:

ומשנה לא ידע כי קרן עור פניו בדברו אתו: - *Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant.*

Moshe had no idea of his shine. He had no understanding of what he looked like and how he was perceived by others. How many of us suffer the same?

We often feel like "who are we?" to lecture our children and those within our sphere of influence. We tell ourselves that our inconsistencies and imperfections make it impossible to really talk to our children about what they should be doing, or we fear that any guidance will be rejected, and the relationship soured. What we don't realize is the radiance that we exude to those who don't necessarily expect our perfection, but still welcome our influence. That illumination is not always expressed with lectures and is often a reflection that shimmers off our behavior instead, but we should deeply understand the raw power we contain.

Our children and grandchildren (everyone, really) seek role models, and we all need to consider the glow that comes off our own faces. We are surrounded by a news cycle of bad behavior and exemplars of poor character. Like Moshe, we need to see ourselves as descending the mountain of Sinai with the heritage and ethics we have received as a glowing example for others. Perhaps, when we are by ourselves, we can and should be more inwardly focused, diminish the glow, and consider our own failings, but when we have the opportunity to be with others, to teach and to embody our values, we need to understand the power we wield and the influence we possess.

Yes, it is also a great idea to keep your camera on during a Zoom class. It allows the teacher to teach toward your understanding and react to the nuance of the student's experience. More important is to recognize that to those around us, our cameras are always on, and we're broadcasting brightly, and loudly.

What does your radiance project?

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach