

Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two Tablets of Testimony in his hand. As Moses descended from the mountain he did not realize that the skin of his face had become radiant when [God] had spoken to him.

Moses descended from Mount Sinai bringing the second Tablets on Yom Kippur, as we shall explain.²⁶

Moses did not know that his face had become radiant when God spoke to him. This happened when Moses was in the cave and God passed before him (34:6). From this, Moses' face shined very brightly with a radiant gleam.²⁷

Some say that Moses received this radiance on his face when he took the second Tablets from God's Hands. The distance between God's "Hands" and Moses' hands was only two handbreadths. We explained earlier that the Tablets were six handbreadths by six handbreadths. God held two handbreadths in His "Hand" and Moses held two handbreadths in his hand. Therefore the distance between God's "Hands" and those of Moses was only two handbreadths. It was from this closeness that Moses received the great light on his face.²⁸

Others say that Moses received this light from the sparks that emanated from God when He taught him the Torah.²⁹

Some say that Moses had this illumination ever since he was born. This light came from the light that God made during the six days of creation. This was an extremely brilliant light (as is explained in the Portion of *Bereshith*).

Moses' face gave off the light of many lamps. If Moses was inside a room he would illuminate an entire house very well.

With this light it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. One could see even the smallest things through that light. This was a pure, refined light and it could be used to see what was happening from one end of the world to the other.

God granted this to Moses to teach people that everything comes from Him, and that He has the power to change the direction of the world and to go against the laws of nature. Normally, when a person eats and drinks much his face glows. When he does not eat and drink his face becomes dull. However, Moses' face did not become dark and dull from his many fasts. It is true that he fasted for forty consecutive days three times, but his face became more radiant. It became so radiant that people could not look at it and they were afraid to come close to him.

From this we also learn the greatness and holiness of Moses. He had bound himself so close to God that he reached the level of the angels and became completely spiritual. This was something that no other human being had ever achieved.

Moses had such great attachment to God and immersion in the Torah that he did not even realize that his face was shining. The Torah therefore says, "Moses did not even know that his face had become radiant when God had spoken to him." Moses was not aware of his face's radiance because "God had spoken to him." Moses had immersed himself so deeply in the teachings that he was not aware of his own self.¹¹

34:30

וַיַּרְא אַהֲרֹן וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרָן עֹד פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ
מִגֹּשֶׁת אֵלָיו:

When Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was shining with a brilliant light, they were afraid to come close to him.

One may raise a question here. Moses' face became radiant when he received the Tablets from God's Hands, as we discussed earlier. Therefore why did his face become radiant with the second Tablets and not with the first Tablets?

The second Tablets were given privately. God had commanded that no man be on the mountain. The Israelites therefore could have claimed that the Tablets did not come from God. God gave Moses a sign, making his face radiant, so the people would then know for certain that Moses had received these Tablets from God's Hands. The first Tablets, however, did not need such a sign, since they were given publicly with thunder and lightning.

34:33

וַיִּכַּל מֹשֶׁה מִדְּבַר אֲתָם וַיָּתֵן עַל-פָּנָיו מִסְכָּה:

When Moses finished speaking with them, he placed a hood over his face.

When Moses saw that the Israelites were terrified of him and were afraid to approach him, he understood that his face was radiant. Therefore, when he finished speaking to them and telling them what God had commanded, he placed a hood or veil over his face.⁴⁰

Moses did this out of respect for the Divine light shining on his face. He did not want people to make common use of it, because it was something highly sacred.⁴¹

34:34

וּכְבָּא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ יָסִיר אֶת-הַמִּסְכָּה עַד-צֵאתוֹ וַיָּצֵא וְדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת אֲשֶׁר יָצָה:

Whenever Moses came before God to speak with Him, he would remove the hood until he was ready to leave. He would then go out and speak to the Israelites, [telling them] what he had been commanded.

It would not be considered respectful to speak to the King with a mask on one's face.

Besides this, Moses received more radiance from the Divine Presence.⁴²

From that day on, Moses' custom was as follows: When he came to speak with the Divine, he was without the hood for the reason we have stated. Also, when he told the Israelites what God had commanded them he would speak without the hood.⁴³ This was so the Israelites would receive the spiritual benefit of that radiance when Moses taught them, so that they would learn all the better.⁴⁴

After Moses finished speaking to them he would place the hood back on his face. He did not want the people to derive any enjoyment from the Holy Light when they were involved in their own concerns.

The Israelites saw Moses' face, that the skin of Moses' face was shining brilliantly. Moses would then replace the hood over his face until he would [once again] speak with God.

Moses was on Mount Sinai three times and each time the radiance of his face increased. This is why the name Moses appears in this verse three times. It is thus literally written, "The Israelites saw Moses' face, that the skin of Moses' face was glowing, and Moses placed the mask over his face."⁴⁵

The Torah also repeats, "The Israelites saw Moses' face." This appears redundant, because the Torah said earlier, "Aaron and all the Israelites saw that Moses' face was radiant . . ." (34:30). But the Torah teaches us that the Israelites now saw that the radiance had increased.⁴⁶

Moses retained this radiance until he died. It is thus written, "His radiance did not diminish and his juices did not leave him" (Deuteronomy 34:7). This teaches that even when Moses was about to die, the radiance that he had had during his lifetime was not diminished.⁴⁷

Some say that Moses covered his face because of his humility. He did not want the people to see how great he was, that he was worthy of this radiance on his face.

It is true that when he taught the people he took off the hood. He felt that the people would assume that the radiance was a result of the Torah that he was teaching. After he finished teaching he would replace the hood.

The Torah therefore says earlier, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face was radiant" (34:29). This seems redundant. However, one may question why Moses did not cover his face as soon as he came down from Mount Sinai. The Torah therefore tells us that Moses did not realize that his face was radiant. If he had known he would have covered it immediately.⁴⁸

One may wonder how it was possible that Moses would not be aware of this tremendous light illuminating his face. As we have said, Moses' face was 60,075 times as bright as the sun. However, the Torah says, "The two Tablets of Testimony were in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain." Moses thought that this light was the result of the Tablets. However, after he saw that the people were afraid to come close to him, he realized that the light had come from his face.⁴⁹

Zera Kodesh (19th C, Galacia)

Naftali Tzvi Horowitz

We know that there is a kind of effulgence (divine light) surrounding every person, just as in holiness we are radiant. And this is the reason we are bidden to keep the image of God continually before our faces. For indeed, the seal of the Holy One is literally on our faces, evoking the shape of Name of the Creator. This is what our sages meant when they spoke of a great principle of the Torah. When we were worthy to stand at God's chosen mountain and we heard the voice issuing the letter aleph, we were fulfilled and the shape of the letter aleph was revealed to us. As we read, "All the people saw the thunder." In other words, they saw what was heard. We saw the form of the letter aleph itself evoking the Name of God. And at that moment, they saw and understood this was also the form of their faces! And this is the reason that we read just after the theophany, "Be not afraid, for God has come only to test you and in order that fear of God may be with you that you might not go astray." When a person continually keeps this idea that God is in the face of every other human being, then s/he will not easily be inclined to go astray.

Maor V'Shemesh (18th C, Poland)

Kalanymos Kalman Halevi Epstein

I will explain it according to its simple meaning. It is known that God made humans b'tzelem elohim (in God's image). What is God's image? This is what tzelem elohim means? It is known that the names of the Holy One of Blessing are ehyeh, havaya and adonai. When a person sanctifies himself- all of his 248 limbs and 365 members and walks in holiness always, then these holy names of God will rest on his face. And this is the meaning of tzelem elohim- the names of God.

And this is what is meant when it is said, "all the people saw shem hashem (the name) of God calling unto you and they were in awe of you." That is to say, so too here, they saw the Name on your face and were in awe of you. And if it is true in this generation that I have seen how pure the vision when people say they saw God on the face of a person, it is all the more true for Moshe who purified himself above all others, that all of God's names rested on his face.

ונראה לפרש על פי פשוטו דהנה ידוע כי גם עתה בדור הזה ראיתי כמה זכי הראות
בצלם אלהים עשה את האדם, מה זה צלם שאמרו שראו על איזה אדם שם הוי"ה על פניו
אלהים רצה לומר שצלם אלהים הוא כך דהנה כראוי. ובודאי על משה רבינו ע"ה שזיכך עצמו
ידוע ששמות הקב"ה הם אהי"ה הוי"ה אדנ"י מכל וכל היה שורה על פניו ממש כל השמות
וכשהאדם מקדש את עצמו כל רמ"ח אבריו של הקב"ה
ושם"ה גידיו והולך בקדושה תמיד אזי שורה על
פניו שמות הקדושים אלו וזהו צלם אלהים
יתברך שמו ממש דהיינו שמותיו יתברך שמו.
וזה שנאמר וראו כל עמי הארץ כי שם ה' נקרא