



Moshe's Mask—And Our Own¹

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

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1. “For his face shone”

Imagine the tension and emotion that *benei Yisrael* felt as they stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. I want to direct our attention to this emotion the *second* time it arises. Moshe has already ascended once before; he has already been present high up on the mountain wrapped in thunder, lightning, and cloud, and the encounter at his descent was a failure: the Calf and its aftermath. The tablets were shattered by Moshe; the process of transmitting the Torah may not have been completed. I suppose that Moshe and *benei Yisrael* feel, at this stage, that the covenant has not entirely been executed. And now it's round two, the tension and emotion are at their peak. Will the encounter succeed this time?

Moshe arrives, is seen, advances—I imagine—step by step from the fire, the thunder, and the cloud, gripping the tablets, the covenant—and... he is seen as terrifying! This is how the verses describe Moshe's appearance, and *benei Yisrael's* reaction:

שמות לד:כט-ל

²⁹וַיְהִי בִּרְדֹּת מֹשֶׁה מִהָרָה סִינִי וְשָׁנִי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתּוֹ מִן־הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא־יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו
בְּדַבְּרוֹ אֹתוֹ: ³⁰וַיֵּרָא אֶהָרָן וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ מִגֹּשֶׁת אֵלָיו:

¹ Translated by Elisheva Urbas.



Shemot 34:29-30

²⁹And it was that when Moshe came down from mount Sinai, and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moshe's hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moshe knew not that the skin of his face shone while God talked with him. ³⁰And Aharon and all the children of Israel saw Moshe and, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come near him.

They see, and they are afraid! All of *benei Yisrael*, and even Moshe's brother Aharon, sees and is afraid. The changed skin of Moshe's face arouses fear, fear that leads to alienation. "And they were afraid to come near him." Moshe's distinctive, different appearance is tied to the people's fear that leads them to distance themselves from him. Difference, fear, distance. "And they were afraid to come near."

Moshe's distinctive appearance is described in the verse with a word that has two very different meanings. We could translate it, "And behold, the skin of his face shone," with a bright glow like sunlight; or "Behold, the skin of his face was horned," with actual horns, like those of an animal. Thus, the verse leaves us puzzled.²

2. "And he masked his face"

Whether his face is beamed with rays like the sun's, or whether these are animal horns, Moshe must find some way to grapple with the fear and alienation that accompany them. And he has a simple and logical solution: "He put a mask upon his face" (Shemot 34:33). He places upon his face a covering, as the commentators explain.

² We know that there was a practice of people wearing horns—or imagining themselves as having horns—about 15,000 years ago. The motivation was to do so as a means of expressing a desire for the proliferation of those types of animals, and to control them, for these were the animals upon which humans depended for their existence. In the Bible, as well, the word קרניים usually appears as meaning, "animal horns." Indeed, this is how the sculptor, Michaelangelo, imagined Moshe holding the tablets, as his face being horned.



To Moshe, it is clear that the responsibility for grappling with the fear of Aharon, his brother, and that of all of *benei Yisrael*, is his to bear. Israel are the ones who are scared; Aharon is afraid; but Moshe is the one who needs to hide himself, to go into the closet, to cover his face. It is heartbreaking to think that, to be with people, Moshe needs to wear a mask, to hide aspects of himself, all because of their weakness.

3. “He would remove the mask... he would replace the mask”

The verses’ description of the way Moshe uses the mask is confusing. It is hard to understand when Moshe places the mask over his face, and when he emerges and removes it:

שמות לד:לג-לה

³³וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדִּבֶּר אֲתָם וַיָּתֵן עַל-פָּנָיו מַסְכָּה: ³⁴וַבֵּבֹא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְקֹזֵק לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ יָסִיר אֶת-הַמַּסְכָּה עַד-צֵאתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא וַדְּבַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת אֲשֶׁר יָצָא: ³⁵וַרְאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-פָּנֵי מֹשֶׁה כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְהִשְׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמַּסְכָּה עַל-פָּנָיו עַד-בֹּאוֹ לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ:

Shemot 34:33-35

³³And when Moshe was done speaking with them, he put a mask on his face. ³⁴But when Moshe went in before God that God might speak with him, he took the mask off, until he came out; and he came out, and spoke to the children of Israel that which he was commanded. ³⁵And the children of Israel saw the face of Moshe, that the skin of Moshe’s face sent forth beams; and Moshe put the mask back upon his face, until he went in to speak with God.

When Moshe stands before *benei Yisrael*, does he stand with the mask on (as verse 34, for example, seems to say) or without it (as verse 35 says)? The Keli Yakar, in an effort to grapple, perhaps, with this ambiguity, transforms the mask into a characteristic trait of Moshe:



כלי יקר על שמות לד:לג

ויתן על פניו מסוה. לפי שהיו הכל מסתכלין בו ומשה היה עניו גדול וביישן, והיה מתבייש על שמסתכלין בקירון עור פניו, כי כך היא המדה בכל מי שהוא ביישן ע"כ נתן על פניו מסוה

Keli Yakar Shemot 34:33

"And he put a mask over his face." Because everyone was looking at him, and Moshe was particularly humble and bashful, and he was embarrassed that they were looking at the beaming of his face's skin, for that is how any bashful person would feel, so he put a mask over his face.

What arises from this is a fascinating insight into the human psyche. When people send me the message, whether directly or indirectly, that something about me is frightening, it can cause me to hide something about myself: I am liable to cover up, to find myself embarrassed, burdened with shame. That is, the distinctive beaming of Moshe's skin leads to fear, which leads to concealment. Concealment, by its very nature, constitutes and preserves alienation—from the world around me, or even from myself.

The Netziv from Volozhin, author of the commentary Ha'amek Davar, proposes a different solution to the verses' apparent ambiguity:

העמק דבר על שמות לד:לד

...דבעת דבר עם ה' הסיר את המסוה לגמרי ותיכף בצאתו נתן את המסוה על ראשו אלא שקיפל את המסוה למעלה למען כשידבר עמם הלכות יראו בפניו ... וברגע שכלה לדבר הוריד את המסוה שעל ראשו על פניו.

Ha'amek Davar Shemot 34:34

...For at a time when he spoke with God, he removed the mask entirely. And before going out, he put the mask on his head, but he folded it upward, so that while he told them the



laws they would see his face... and the moment he finished speaking, he lowered the mask that was on his head over his face.

Facing God in the moment of dialogue, on a divine mission in the moment of partnership, there is the ability to reveal, to be revealed, to include. Why? And what does it mean that facing God one can stand unmasked?

Moshe does not need to hide parts of himself when he faces the Creator because the very fact of his uniqueness and distinctiveness is itself an implication of his being created in God's image. I wonder whether, sometimes, in the nature of relational systems, we confuse equality and identity, or whether we are not always careful enough about the implications of equality. Equality does not mean similarity. The fact that all people are equal does not derive from our sameness to each other. Quite the opposite: God's image in the world is magnified and augmented by the variation among us.

And when we overcome our impulse to fear differences between us—to fear one whose face shines with a different light—when we overcome the impulse to hide our unique faces and lights, then we take a small step toward an opportunity to emulate God, to walk more fully in God's ways. When we speak in these terms, we are partners in building a community with room for all to flower as images of divinity, a community where none of us needs to wear veils or masks. When we overcome the fear that comes from seeing horns or rays of light, and beneath it we see who is standing before us—every Moshe, whoever they are!—then we merit to be a segment of those who see: “And *benei Yisrael* saw Moshe's face, that the skin of Moshe's face shone with light.”



4. From “They feared to come near” to “they returned to him”

It’s worth paying attention to one more point: What makes it possible for Moshe to remove his mask is speech:

שמות לד:לא-לג

³¹וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁבוּ אֵלָיו אַהֲרֹן וְכָל־הַנְּשָׂאִים בְּעֵדָה וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֲלֵהֶם: ³²וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן נִגְשׂוּ כָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּצִי־אֶת כָּל־אִשָּׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֵתוֹ בְּהַר סִינַי: ³³וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מִדְּבַר אֲתָם וַיִּתֵּן עַל־פָּנָיו מַסָּחָה:

Shemot 34:31-33

³¹And Moshe called to them; and Aharon and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him; and Moshe **spoke** to them. ³²And afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them in commandment all that God had **spoken** with him in Mount Sinai.

³³And when Moshe was done **speaking** with them, he put a veil on his face.

It’s true that revelation sometimes makes connection hard. After all, when Moshe’s face shone, human beings did not dare to approach him. But it is clear that veiling and hiding make encounter harder, too. What ultimately makes it possible for Moshe to meet *benei Yisrael* unveiled is speech. In speech, there can be dialogue, voice, content, and opportunity for encounter—an encounter that has two sides.

Thus, instead of difference, fear, and alienation, we can see a new process unfold: difference, speech, diversity, community.

