

Chapter 6

RELIGIOUS AUTHENTICITY AND WONDER IN
AND BEYOND HALACHA

THINGS THAT ARE ALIVE constantly move and grow. Organic matter that fails to grow, shift, and move, decays and eventually dies. So it is with the human being. A man who does not strive to grow and transform himself, who does not live with passion and excitement, is a man who is not fully living. Such men merely exist and survive on our planet. Like all of God's creations, Man must experience seasons of his soul – cycles of change and renewal.

Jewish philosophy sees God primarily as a Creator: "Every day He (re)creates the works of the beginning." The Jew declares this every morning during his prayers. And since Man is "created in the image of God," it follows that man, in his essence, must also be a creator.¹ A man who is not constantly engaged in creative endeavors, denies his nature.

The role of religion is to facilitate the blooming of the soul, and to prevent Man from descending into spiritual stagnation. Genuine religion should implant a consciousness in men that helps them actualize their creative energy, thus allowing them to emulate their Creator at the highest level. One of the most powerful ways that religions accomplish this critical goal, is by training their followers in the art of wonderment.

Mask Logic

In a fascinating passage in the Torah concerning Moshe's descent from Sinai, we learn about one of his most remarkable initiatives:

¹ *Bereshit* 1.25.

"When Moshe descended from Mount Sinai, with the Tablets of Testimony in Moshe's hands; as he descended from the mountain, Moshe did not realize that the skin on his face became radiant when he spoke to Him. Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moshe, and behold, Moshe's skin had become radiant; and they feared to approach him. Moshe called to them and they came to him – Aaron and all the princes of the assembly – and Moshe spoke to them.

After that, all the children of Israel would approach, and he would command them regarding everything that God had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. After Moshe finished speaking to them, he placed a mask on his face. When Moshe came before God to speak with Him, he would remove the mask until his departure, and then he would leave and recount to the children of Israel what he was commanded. And the children would see Moshe's face – that the skin of Moshe's face was radiant. Moshe would put the mask back on his face until he came to speak with Him" (*Shemot* 34: 29–35).

What was the purpose of this mask? Why did Moshe need to hide his radiance? It seems that Moshe concealed his shining face when he spoke with the people. This would make sense since the people, and even his own brother Aaron, were afraid to approach him. The glow from Moshe's face overwhelmed and paralyzed the people who beheld it. As such, one might conclude that the main purpose of the mask was to allow the people to be close to Moshe without fear or intimidation.

A deeper analysis of the text, however, suggests a very different reading. A second look reveals that Moshe actually removes the mask in the presence of the B'nei Yisrael, and puts it back on his face only *after* speaking with them. The classical work, *Bina Le'itim*, provides a

fascinating insight into this episode.² What was God's intention when he caused Moshe's face to become illuminated? Moshe did not need to be convinced of the fact that he had received the word of God. Therefore, the rays of light emanating from Moshe's face must have conveyed a necessary message to the people regarding Moshe's religious integrity, authenticity, and authority. Above all, Moshe's incandescent countenance was meant to invoke a religious "joie de vivre" in the hearts of the Jewish people, and to thoroughly energize them with spiritual verve.

The radiance allowed the Jewish people to be newly inspired every time they looked at the face of their leader and teacher. The supernatural glow ideally would have kept the Jews in a permanent state of religious amazement. This was critical since God communicated His word through Moshe over a period of time. Thus, Moshe's face reminded the people of the source of the commandments, and ensured that they received God's laws with the right attitude. The awe they felt while listening to a man whose face was alight with spiritual energy, allowed them to experience each communication as if it were the first – with a sense of novelty and excitement. God's messages captivated them completely, as Moshe delivered the Word in all its nuanced complexity.

Of course, we all know that human beings can become desensitized to astonishing stimuli very quickly. How many of us still marvel at our ability to speak to our friends via cell phone? How many of us are awed each time we profit from the convenience of the Internet? So too, if the people saw Moshe walking around the camp with a radiant face all the time, the effect would have worn off. Only by revealing his face sporadically, on special occasions, could the phenomenon continue to astonish, as it did when Moshe first came

² *Bina Le'itim, parashat Ki Tisa.*

down from the mountain. For the radiance to stay radiant, it had to be hidden. Familiarity breeds contempt!

So when Moshe walked through the camp, he wore his mask.³ In this way, the people never got the chance to become desensitized to the experience of hearing direct communication from the Creator of the Universe, nor did they doubt their teacher's legitimacy.

The Temple Gates

The prophet Yechezkel saw the following vision concerning the third and future Temple:

And on the Mo'adim (festivals) when the Amei Ha'aretz (common people) came before the Lord (in the future Temple) – whoever enters by the northern gate to bow low, shall leave by the south gate, and whoever enters by the south gate shall leave through the northern gate. They shall not go back through the same gate by which they came in, but shall go out by the opposite one (46:9)

Rabbi Jonathan Eibeshutz in his classic commentary on *Pirke Avot* asks what purpose it served to have people enter and leave through different gates. He writes, "God was particular that man should not see the same gate (of the Temple) twice. Lest he see the gate as he sees the door of his house."⁴

If people became overly familiar with the House of God, it would cease to serve one of its most valuable purposes. The Temple invoked in man a sense of great wonder. While inside the first temples, the Jewish people witnessed many miraculous occurrences that sensitized them to the hidden miracles manifested in their

³ It seems that Moshe's mask was a kind of hair-thin covering which did not completely hide his face.

⁴ Rabbi Jonathan Eibeshutz on *Pirke Avot* 5:7.

everyday lives.⁵ This sensitization process began with the Temple gates.

An object we observe twice, already begins to lose its aura. In spiritual matters, this presents a serious problem. Since even a second encounter carries the seeds of familiarity and ultimately boredom, one should (for the sake of his connection with the Creator of the universe) try never to see anything more than once. Of course, the best way to combat this problem, since we obviously must all traverse the same paths many times as we go about our routines, is to see things always with a new eye and a sharper understanding. Since we cannot provide ourselves with an ever-new environment to stave off our ennui, we must change our perception and ourselves so that we notice new aspects, details, and depths, in the things we've seen on numerous occasions before. The Temple was the ultimate worldview elevator; after being inside, it was virtually impossible not to see the world in a completely new light.

Rabbi Jonathan Eibeshutz sees this issue at the center of the Golden Calf incident.⁶ Somehow the Israelites got too familiar with Moshe and became desensitized to his unprecedented greatness and religious authenticity. They therefore desired a new spiritual conduit, and believed erroneously that they could generate it themselves. This attempt to replace Moshe was their very undoing. Had they made themselves into deeper perceivers of reality, instead, they would have recognized that below the surface, their leader Moshe was a spiritual giant. Precisely because the Jewish people failed to appreciate what they already had, God blessed Moshe later with his astonishing facial radiance.

Not only did the people take Moshe for granted, the community also lost their awe of God. In a sense, the Golden Calf was also an

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Eibeshutz, *ibid.*