

# ***Parashat Ki Tisa***

## **An Avraham Moment**

In an unforgettable *derashah*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik compared the personalities of Avraham and Moshe. He contrasted their unique traits and even speculated about who should be considered the greater of the two.<sup>1</sup>

In a lengthy passage, The Talmud says explicitly that in at least one respect Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov outshined Moshe. God appeared to them without the Tetragrammaton, that is to say in a reduced way without manifest miracles, and commanded them to do various things. When they faced adversity in carrying them out, they did not complain to God or second-guess Him. Moshe was privy to open miracles, yet when his first encounter with Pharaoh was unsuccessful, he was quick to question the veracity of the divine promises.<sup>2</sup> According to the Sages, it seems his faith was weaker than that of his illustrious forebears.

Furthermore, the Rav observed, in our daily prayers we invoke the Patriarchs in the *Amidah*, addressing “the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov,” but not “the God of Moshe.” He does not seem to rank with them.

Yet, Moshe’s achievements are legendary. One of the thirteen principles of faith composed by the Rambam is that Moshe was and will always be the greatest of our prophets. This even has a biblical source: “There has not since risen a prophet in Israel like Moshe, whom God knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10). If God Himself attested this about Moshe, in this respect he must have outpaced the Patriarchs.

Given the evidence in both directions, the Rav suggested that an accurate assessment of Moshe requires examining his actions during the episode of the golden calf, which was a pivotal episode in his life.

### ***A Moment to Shine***

God tells Moshe, “Go down, for your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted corruptly” (Exodus 32:7). Rashi cites the Talmud, which interprets “Go down” to mean “Go down from your greatness, for I only gave you greatness on their account.” After all, what is a leader without a people? If the people have debased themselves, the leader must be demoted too. Rashi then adds a gloss from a Midrash: “At that moment, Moshe was banished by decree of the Heavenly Court.”<sup>3</sup> Moshe’s excommunication signals a precipitous loss of status.

Why did the Almighty respond with such stinging reproach to Moshe? Perhaps the following passage in the Talmud reveals God’s motivation:

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<sup>1</sup> For the full analysis, only parts of which are presented below, see Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 77–103.

<sup>2</sup> *Sanhedrin* 111a.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi on Exodus 32:7, s.v. דָּלָה, citing *Berachot* 32a and *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Ki Tisa*, §22.

Whereupon Moshe's strength ebbed such that he had no strength to speak. As soon as God said, "Leave me alone, that I might destroy them" (Deuteronomy 9:14), Moshe said, "This matter depends on me!" He immediately rose, strengthened himself in prayer, and pleaded for mercy.

It is comparable to a king who was enraged at his son, and while he was administering a severe beating to him, his friend sat before him and was afraid to say anything to him. The king said [to the prince], "Were it not for this friend of mine sitting before me, I would kill you." The friend said, "The matter depends on me!" Immediately he rose and saved him.<sup>4</sup>

The Rav suggested that when God proposed destroying the Jewish people, He did not mean it. It was a test of leadership to see whether Moshe would rise to the occasion. Until now, Moshe had led the people with signs and wonders. Unlike Avraham, he was further given clear directives and instructions, guided every step of the way by God. Now that he was a *persona non grata*, he presumably had lost the King's favor. The parable demonstrates the grave danger he faced: if he tried to defend the prince, he might lose his position. Would he step up to God to avert an evil decree, as Avraham did at length for the wicked city of Sodom?

Moshe had an "aha" moment. He realized that even after losing his privileged position, if he protested strongly enough God might yet change His mind. So, Moshe acted without delay and at great risk to himself, willing to be blotted out of the entire Torah. This was Moshe's "Avraham moment," when he showed himself to be a true, capable, fully invested leader:

Rabbi Abahu said: Were this verse not written in the Torah, it would be impossible to say it. It teaches that Moshe grabbed hold of the Holy One like a person grabs his friend by the clothes, and said before Him: "Master of the Universe, I will not let you go until You forgive and pardon them."<sup>5</sup>

Moshe went so far as to slight the honor of the King, disregarding the potential repercussions, in order to save his people.

As a result, Moshe became the "father" of the Jewish people. God said, "I will wipe them out and make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:10), and although the former did not come to pass, God's beneficent promises are fulfilled. The entire people became Moshe's children. This is why certain laws are called "a *halachah* to Moshe from Sinai" (הֲלָכָה לְמֹשֶׁה מִסִּינַי), and the betrothal ceremony is performed "according to the law of Moshe and Israel" (כְּדֹת מֹשֶׁה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל). Because he was ready to sacrifice everything on behalf of the nation, the entire Torah is Moshe's.

### *The Glow*

On January 28, 1980, the Rav attended a *farbrengen*, a gathering of Lubavitch Chassidim, marking thirty years since Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson became the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. The following day, Rabbi Avraham Shemtov asked the Rav to share his

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<sup>4</sup> *Berachot* 32a.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

impressions. The Rav posed a question about the episode of the golden calf. Moshe supplicated God for eighty days, after which he received the second set of tablets. Then, the Torah tells us, “The skin of his face had become radiant” (Exodus 34:30). Why only now did his face glow, and not with the first tablets?

Before receiving the second tablets, Moshe beseeched God to forgive the Jewish people, protesting God’s terrible decree. He laid his life on the line for those who according to strict judgment did not deserve it. The prayers of Moshe on that lonely mountaintop elicited our most powerful and dramatic liturgy, our lifeline when all else fails, the thirteen attributes of mercy. Through all this, Moshe was transformed:

During the first forty days and nights on Mount Sinai, Moshe was a Rosh Yeshiva; during the following eighty days he was transformed into a rebbe [...] the person who suspends his entire self for his people, the individual who will quarrel with God Himself for his nation.

The Rav turned to Rabbi Shemtov and said about the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

I knew the Rebbe in Berlin. I knew him as a great Torah scholar, a brilliant man, an extraordinary genius. But now – sitting at the *farbregen* in tribute to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his leadership – I observed that glow... the glow spread over Moshe’s face when he descended with the second tablets after eighty days of complete dedication and commitment, the glow reserved for the human being who sacrifices everything for the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>

### *Exploring the Rav’s Insight*

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin observed that both Avraham and Yaakov were called upon by God with a repetition of their name: “Avraham, Avraham” (Genesis 22:1) and “Yaakov, Yaakov” (Genesis 46:2). In both cases there is a *pesik*, a vertical line graphically separating each mention of the name, signaling to the reader to pause. This marker does not appear in the actual Torah scroll but is part of an oral tradition reproduced in all printings. Notably, when God first speaks to Moshe, saying “Moshe, Moshe” (Exodus 3:4), there is no *pesik*. Rabbi Herschel Schachter explains that in Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin’s thinking, usually there is a gap, a *pesik*, dividing a person’s potential from their actual achievements. Moshe had no such gap, having merged the potential with the actual. He actualized all of the talents and capacities within him to become the most elevated of human beings.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Y.Y. Jacobson, “The Glow,” <http://www.southbrunswickchabad.com/page.asp?pageID=%7B90893D59-4D70-459B-9527-6C3CA30A7FBE%7D&displayAll=1> (accessed March 3, 2021). Ellipses in the original.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Herschel Schachter, “Striving to Reach One’s Full Potential” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/891692/rabbi-herschel-schachter/striving-to-reach-one-s-full-potential/> (accessed March 4, 2021). See *Nefesh ha-Chayim*, pt. 3, ch. 13 (end).