

D'var Torah for Parshat Ki Tisa

By Anthoni Berg, 8th Grade

At the end of Parshat Ki Tisa, Moshe comes back down from Mt. Sinai with the two tablets in his hands and with his face glowing. When people saw his face, they were scared. Then the Torah describes how Moshe would teach the Jews the Torah he learned from G-d. First he would teach Aharon and the leaders, and then he would invite the rest of the people.

The very next verse tells us that Moshe put on a mask to cover his glowing face. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz from 16th century Prague explains in his classic commentary, Klei Yakar, that because he was so humble, Moshe felt uncomfortable with the admiring stares of the people. The Torah then reports that he did remove the mask on two occasions.

"וַיִּבָּא מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי ה' לְדַבֵּר אֵתוֹ יְסִיר אֶת-הַמָּסָה עַד-צֵאתוֹ וַיֵּצֵא וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה:"

“ When Moses would come before the Lord to speak with Him, he would remove the covering until he left; then he would leave and speak to the children of Israel what he would be commanded.”

The verse says that he only took off the mask when he was teaching the children of Israel and when he spoke with G-d.

It is understandable that he took the mask off when he was teaching his students, the people of Israel. It is certainly important for students to see their teachers' faces because so much is communicated through facial expressions. It also makes sense that Moshe took it off to speak with G-d, because there was no reason to wear it in G-d's presence. G-d wasn't looking at Moshe admiringly! But why does the Torah point it out? The Torah only records important details!

The Klei Yakar continues,

" אבל בבואו לפני ה' ללמוד תורה מפיו, אז הוצרך להסיר מסוה הבושה מעל פניו, כי לא הביישן למד' (אבות ב ו)"

“But, when he came before G-d to learn Torah, he needed to remove the mask because ‘a bashful person cannot learn’ (Ethics of the Fathers 2:6)”

Rabbi Shlomo explains that had Moshe worn the mask when learning Torah with G-d, it would have been a reminder of the normally positive trait of humility and detracted from the boldness that is necessary for effective learning. Students must be able to ask questions and make comments in a totally free way.

Wow! Even when learning Torah from G-d, a student must speak freely and with confidence. What a lesson for us! We should never think that a question is stupid, or that we have no right to question a teacher. Certainly respect for the teacher is also extremely important. But, it is also necessary to learn aggressively, by asking and commenting until we understand.