

Parashat Ki Tisa 5782, 2022:

The Power of Torah She'Beal Peh

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The best-known theme in our *parasha* is the *Chet HaEgel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf), the most grievous sin in our nation's storied history. In addition, our *sidrah* contains the powerful narratives of Hashem's forgiveness for this heinous offense, and Moshe's second journey to the crest of *Har Sinai* with the second set of tablets (*luchot*) in hand, upon which Hashem inscribed "the words that were on the first *luchot* ... the words of the Covenant, the Ten Commandments." (*Sefer Shemot* 34:1 and 28, all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

While the words that were on the first *luchot* and the second *luchot* were the same, their origin was significantly different. Whereas in the first instance the Torah states, "now the tablets were Hashem's work," (32:16) regarding the second *luchot* we find, "hew for yourself [Moshe] two stone tablets like the first ones... (34:1) Moreover, a singular difference obtains between Moshe of the first *luchot*, and Moshe of the second, for it is only in the latter case that the Torah relates his miraculous transformation:

And it came to pass when Moshe descended from Mount Sinai, and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moshe's hand when he descended from the mountain, and Moshe did not know that the skin of his face had become radiant (*ki karan or panuv*) while He had spoken with him. And Aharon and all *b'nai Yisrael* saw Moshe and behold! the skin of his face had become radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. (34:29-30)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, suggests that “Moshe’s face began to radiate light because he spoke frequently with God.” (This and the following Rav Soloveitchik quotes, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 188-189, brackets and underlining my own.) As even a cursory reading of the Torah suggests, however, *Moshe Rabbeinu* had engaged in many ongoing and intense personal encounters with Hashem prior to receiving the second set of *luchot*. This is perhaps why the Rav asked: “Why did Moshe develop this quality [of radiating light] on Yom Kippur [per the second set of *luchot*] rather than on Shavuot [per the first set of *luchot*], when God spoke to him?” In my estimation, the Rav’s response is nothing less than an intellectual tour de force:

The answer lies in the difference between the Oral Law [*Torah she’beal peh*] and the Written Law [*Torah she’bichtav*]. In receiving the Law, Moshe was a worthy messenger uniquely qualified for this purpose. However, his personality was not yet intertwined with the Torah. The quality of radiance implies that Moshe absorbed the Torah into the essence of his personality—that he now personified the Torah and, in effect, had been transformed into a living *sefer Torah*. This happened only on Yom Kippur when he received the Oral Torah.

The Rav’s answer is based upon his analysis that, “in the same way that Parashat Yitro describes the giving of the Written Law to Moshe [first *luchot*, Shavuot], Parashat Ki Tisa describes the giving of the *Torah she’beal peh*—the Oral Law [second *luchot*, Yom Kippur]:” The Rav derives this concept from the verse that appears in our *parasha* two *pasukim* before we are told of Moshe’s radiant face: “Hashem said to Moshe: ‘Inscribe these words for yourself, for according to these words [that is, *Torah she’beal peh*] I have formed a covenant with you and with Israel.’” (34:27) As such, the Rav maintains that *Moshe Rabbeinu* became a “living *sefer Torah*... only on Yom Kippur when he received the Oral Torah.”

It is crucial to note that this *pasuk* also states, “for according to these words I have formed a covenant with you [Moshe] and with Israel.” Though only Moshe was transformed to the point that he literally radiated the light of the Torah, the Jewish people were also changed for evermore when Hashem gave us the second set of *luchot*—the *Torah she’beal peh*—for this is the source of our everlasting covenant with Him. As the Rav asserts: “Only through the Oral Law could God make a lasting covenant with the Israelites. The Talmud in Tractate *Gittin* [60b] states, ‘God made a covenant with the Jewish people exclusively around the Oral Law.’”

These ideas are given voice in the celebrated phrase of our morning *tefilah*: “*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u’mah nayim goraleinu u’mah yafah yerushateinu!*” (“We are overjoyed in the goodness of our portion! And how pleasing is our fate! And how desirous is our inheritance!”). May our eternal covenant with the Almighty, created through the unique power of the *Torah she’beal peh*, bring us ever closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)