

Horns of Skin

This week we read about the Golden Calf and then Moses going back up the mountain to receive the second copy of the Ten Commandments, carved into stone. This is the third quite separate narrative in the Torah that describes the process of the revelation of Torah.

Uniquely here, after the second period of forty days and nights that Moses spent communing with God, when he comes down his face is so distorted with rays of light that the people are scared to look at him. So he puts on a mask to cover his face and only takes it off when he communes with God. What is going on here?

Firstly let's clear up a silly mistranslation. The text says Moses came down from the mountain and his encounter with God, with "Karan or panav." Literally "with skin on his face shining" or beaming. Mistranslating Karan can give you "horn." Or can mean skin or the material animal horns are made of. So Moses came down with animal horns. That is why Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses gives him horns! Oh for poor translators.

Clearly what Moses experienced with God was something so powerful that it changed the way he looked. Perhaps his eyes were wild with ecstasy. Perhaps his skin shone with enlightenment. Or if one wants to be rational, the two sets of forty days and nights of fasting made him look positively skeletal. Whatever, it was, Moses had to cover his face when talking to the people.

One explanation is that genuine spiritual experience makes us forget the mundane controls of ordinary life. In our excitement we can sometimes look and behave strangely. Our eyes move and oscillate. Our bodies sway and contort. This is one of the reasons given for covering eyes when we say the Shema or when the priests bless us so as not to distract those who might be looking at us.

Normally in most societies masks are there to disguise, or used to make one look fierce or powerful. Here uniquely the mask is used to make Moses appear more human, not less. In spiritual terms the mask reminds us that in our daily dealings we disguise ourselves, we put on masks all the time, not literally but figuratively. Often these masks get in the way of being a spiritual person. The aim of every spiritual person is to try to remove as much or as many of the masks as possible.