

In the *Eishet Hayyil* (A Woman of Valor) poem sung at the Shabbat dinner table, we find (Proverbs 31:30 a)

נְשִׁקָר הַחַן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי. "Grace is deceptive, beauty illusory" (NJPS)

Our *Parasha* contains the very important story of the Molten Calf, as well as the 13 special attributes of God. I would like to look, rather at a different part of the *Parasha*. While, in today's *Parasha*, we do not actually see a story about physical beauty, such as we see about Joseph or King David. Nonetheless, there is a story of disfigurement which changes everyone's lives.

We find (p. 545/6)

לד: כט וַיְהִי בְרִדַת מֹשֶׁה מִהַר סִינַי וְשָׁנֵי לַחַת הָעֵדוּת בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה בְּרִדְתוֹ מִן-הַהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא-  
יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בְּדַבְּרוֹ אִתּוֹ: ל וַיֵּרָא אֶהְרֹן וְכָל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וְהִנֵּה קָרַן עוֹר  
פָּנָיו וַיִּירָאוּ מִגִּשְׁתֵּת אֱלֹהֵיו: לג וַיְכַל מֹשֶׁה מְדַבֵּר אִתָּם וַיִּתֵּן עַל-פָּנָיו מַסְוָה:

34:29 So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. 30 Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him... 33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.<sup>1</sup>

The JPS translation in our *Humash* renders this as Moses' face was radiant. The Hebrew is קָרַן עוֹר. That his skin was קָרַן. The usual English translation of this is "Horns", hence the

Medieval pictures of Moses with horns on his forehead. The Brown Driver Briggs dictionary of the Bible translates this as "sent out rays".<sup>ii</sup> It is important that קרן be rendered this way. Onkelos renders it as זיו יקרא a splendid appearance. This term is used in the Zohar to refer to the splendor of God. Rashi says that these were called קרן, the noun form, because the rays of light looked like horns.

No matter how this strange verse is rendered, we have the statement that when Moses was with God, he uncovered his face, but around the Israelites, he wore the mask, because they were not able to handle the spiritual radiance of Moses.

Now, since we have established that this was actually not horns, technically, Moses was not disfigured. However, if you take the word קרן literally, you could argue that he was actually disfigured and that he hid his appearance the way someone with a facial deformity might hide theirs.

A few years ago, I did a research paper for a class on Disabilities in the Bible, based on this section of text. The change we see in Moses after this incident is profound.

A study of the interactions between Moses and other people in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers bring out some

interesting results. These categories can be broken down in many ways, of course, but with use of these categories, the results are as follows:

Results of study	Before the change	After the change
Direct interpersonal dialogue (1)	14	6
Action without dialogue	4	18
Dialogue with Aaron present (2)	11	11
Dialogue between Moses and Israel (3)	19	28

- (1) Moses and one or a few people
- (2) Eleazar replaced Aaron after Aaron's death
- (3) This category is for collectives of people whether all of Israel or a large group less than all of Israel.

After Moses' face is changed, he of course, continues to interact with people. Yet before the change, 14 of 48 (29%) of interactions are direct with other people. Afterwards, we see 6 of 63 (9 %). Prior to change, 4 of 48 (8%) of actions are without speaking, afterwards, 18 of 63 (29%).

In other words, we don't see Moses talking directly to the Israelites as much after the incident as we did before, even though this comes before the books of Leviticus and Numbers. Rather we see Moses acting without directly talking to the Israelites. It's almost as if he were ashamed or embarrassed by the change in his appearance.

We learned in our text that Moses would take off his mask to speak to the people at large. Perhaps, by arranging the people with those who were close to him (Joshua, the priests and the elders) physically closest to him, and Israel further off, it was not as stressful for either Moses or Israel, while during personal actions it was very stressful for all concerned.

It can be difficult for people with disfigurements to face other people. According to psychotherapist Jane Frances, "Children with disfigurements are less popular... This is a particular cause for concern as people with facial disfigurements... (because children) who coped well were very clear that friends as well as family were important factors which supported their resilience."<sup>iii</sup>

We've all seen the ads for "Smile Train,"<sup>iv</sup> the charitable organization whose work is to arrange to have corrective surgery for disfigured children. This work is so necessary because most people can't look past the disfigurement to see the person behind it.

There are also programs like Operation Mend at the UCLA Medical center, where military personnel with severely damaged

faces go to receive advanced plastic surgery. The troops there state that this program has literally given them their lives back.

In our dealings with people with physical differences, such as Moses' face after it is changed, it is important to remember that, as I stated at the beginning of this talk, : משלי לא:ל שָׁקֵר הַחַן : Grace is deceptive, beauty illusory. In other words, we are obligated to transcend a person's physical characteristics and look at their נשמה to decide whether they are a good person or not. We are obligated to rise above judging or marginalizing a person because they have an unusual face.

### שבת שלום

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<sup>i</sup> *Humash Etz Hayim*, USCJ/RA/JPS pp 545, 6

<sup>ii</sup> *The Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000. p. 902

<sup>iii</sup> Jane Frances, *Educating Children with Facial Disfigurement: Creating Inclusive School Communities* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004) 12, *Questia*, 3 Apr. 2008 <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=107633110>>. P. 68.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.smiletrain.org/>