

# Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

## KI TISA

Following the sin of the golden calf, Moshe's smashing the two Tablets of stone, G-d's partial forgiveness of the Israelites, and Moshe's impassioned plea responded to with His willingness to continue to lead them Himself rather than only through an emissary:

*(Moshe said to G-d): "Show me Your glory."*

*(G-d said to Moshe): "I will make all My goodness pass before you... I shall show favour to whom I shall show favour, and I shall show mercy to whom I shall show mercy."*

*(G-d further said to Moshe): "You will not be able to see My face. For no human may see My face and live." (33:18-20)*

The Rashbam draws attention to Moshe Rabbeinu's sudden change in tone when conversing with the Almighty. He observes that when he met G-d for the first time, he was so scared that he turned his face away (3:6). His trademark humility then and ever since sharply and apparently contrasted with his attitude just at this point. Instead of thanking G-d for accepting his plea to lead the Israelites in person, as it were, Moshe directly confronted G-d with "Show me Your glory."

G-d seemed to say "No". G-d explained that the mere human being can neither physically comprehend who G-d is ("No human may see My face and live"), nor grasp how He assesses human behaviour and dispenses justice ("I shall show favour to whom I shall show favour, and I shall show mercy to whom I shall show mercy").

But, surprisingly, G-d did not rebuke Moshe for asking the question in the first place.

In explanation, the Rashbam brings an insight into what Moshe Rabbeinu really wanted from G-d. He knew that despite the people's absolute and enthusiastic acceptance of the Torah with the resounding NA'ASEH V'NISHMA - We will do whatever G-d tells us first and find out why afterwards (24:7) - this wasn't necessarily going to happen when things went back to the regular routines and challenges of daily living. Things were not going to go as they should all the time, not with individuals and not with the community. As brought to a head by the sin of the golden calf.

The Rashbam's explanation implies that what Moshe Rabbeinu really wanted from G-d was His promise, His covenant, that G-d would not abandon His people even when they would not quite live up to the standards He set for them. For G-d

had agreed to lead the people now, but what of the future? Would he reject them if they strayed from the path again?

The normal way for enacting such a promise was by a formal covenant. With Avraham Avinu, G-d promised him to give the Land to his descendants. G-d enacted that with sudden appearance by passing through as "a smoking furnace and a torch of fire..." (B'reishit 15:17). That act sealed His promise, His Covenant. It was that type of arrangement that Moshe Rabbeinu wanted. He wanted G-d to show His glory by His making the same type of promise that He had made to Avraham, and in the same way.

So G-d hadn't said "No". He implied that He knew that his people were humans, and that He would pass through before Moshe and seal the covenant. Not with a smoking furnace and a torch of fire, but in person, as it were. And in doing so, He revealed His identity to Moshe Rabbeinu with His SHALOSH ESREI MIDOT, the 13 Divine Attributes: G-d passed before him and proclaimed: "Hashem, Hashem... slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth..." (34:6-8).

In G-d's passing through to make this Covenant, the Talmud (Rosh HaShana 17b) brings the tradition that G-d appeared to Moshe not as a smoking furnace and a torch of fire - that

occurred at Matan Torah (19:18, 20:15) as well as with Avraham Avinu - but wrapped in a tallit as one who leads the congregation in prayer, and He showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him, "Whenever Israel sins, let them perform before me this order of prayer, and I shall forgive them." A tallit around the head blocks out outside distractions, and helps a person to concentrate. G-d was teaching Moshe that when people concentrate on praying, G-d concentrates on fulfilling their requests.

But what exactly were the terms of that Covenant? According to the tradition brought by Rabbeinu Tam (Talmud: Rosh HaShana 17b, Tosafot s.v. Shalosh Esrei), the meanings of the final words of the SHALOSH ESREI MIDOT are "Forgiver of AVON (sin done on purpose, out of weakness), PESHA (sin done on purpose - with the intention of angering of G-d), and CHATA'A (cheit - sin done out of carelessness or apathy)". In all three cases, V'NAKEI LO Y'NAKEH - literally, 'He cleanses, but He does not cleanse' means that only when a person sincerely repents, G-d removes his sin so that its effect vanishes (c.f. Yechezkel 18:21-22); otherwise He does not.

(S'forno goes further - interpreting this expression to mean that G-d fully forgives those who repent out of love, but only partially forgives those

who repent out of fear of Divine retribution.)

So in essence G-d wanted two things from his people in order that He might make a 'covenant' of 'doing wonderful things that have never been created in the whole world and among all the nations' (34:10).

[Witness, for example, that nations have come and gone, but our people have always continued.]

He wanted the people to connect with Him and not to idolatry (34:11-17), and he wanted the people to reflect on their failings and do their best to improve. Genuine mistakes along the journey He will accommodate, so long the human striving is in the right direction.

"The righteous person may fall seven times, but he will overcome. It is the wicked who will stumble through evil" (Mishlei 24:16). 📖