

From the Kli Yakar Jacob Solomon

Following the sin of the golden calf and the smashing of the first tablets of stone, G-d instructed Moshe on Mount Sinai to write a new covenant. The Ramban explains that the Israelites would accept it on the same terms as the original covenant: "We will do and we will listen" (24:7), and that G-d would confirm His promise not to destroy them. On his descent:

Aaron and the Israelites saw Moshe... his face shone brightly, and they were frightened to approach him (34:29-30).

Rashi explains why Moshe's face shone so brightly that the people could not go near him. That radiance emanated from Moshe because G-d enabled him to glimpse His glory during his most recent period of instruction on Mount Sinai: "I will shield you with My hand until I pass" (33:22).

Nevertheless, Moshe let his brightness continue to shine as he taught the people what he learnt from G-d on Mount Sinai. Only afterwards, he would veil his face and not remove it until G-d spoke to him again (33:31-35).

The K'li Yakar explains why Moshe then placed a veil over his face. It was an act of modesty. He was embarrassed that his radiance was distracting their attention from important matters. It may also have been a gesture of approachability. But

he would remove the veil of modesty when returning to G-d for fresh instruction (34:34) because over-modesty can interfere with the educational process: "He who is embarrassed does not learn" (Hillel, in Avot 2:5).

"He who is embarrassed does not learn". It is natural to remember your inadequacies when in the presence of the great, or when others are listening in. It is natural to feel awkward to speak up when unsure: to ask for clarification, to ask for the concept to be re-explained. It is tempting just to let it go, and then forget the whole thing. Or worse, half-understand it and misrepresent it to others. The Tanna D'vei Eliyahu (based on Mishlei 30:32) derives that a person must steel himself to ask for help in "getting it" even at the risk of being ridiculed. Otherwise what is learnt will be improperly digested and erroneously passed on.

Hillel continues: "An over-strict, pedantic teacher should not teach". However revered and distinguished, the teacher has to create a student-friendly environment. The students should feel comfortable and take responsibility for their own learning even when asking for clarification or for the latest idea to be reconciled with previously studied sources. Indeed, G-d would speak to Moshe "face-to-face, as one person speaks to another" (33:11). This was not the place for the modesty represented by the veil; it was for frank exchange. That is how Moshe strove to "get it"

himself before teaching the word of G-d to the Israelites.

However the student-friendly environment has to be balanced with kavod haTorah. Moshe did not wear the veil when he formally addressed and taught the Israelites, in order that nothing would stand in between G-d's teaching and the people of Israel. It also made awe part of the educational experience. But modesty with the veil and approachability would resume as soon as that teaching was formally delivered.

Perhaps this gives some background to traditional Yeshiva practice whereby the Beit HaMidrash and Gemara shiurim are relatively informal: the students are encouraged to ask questions and engage with the topic from all angles. Yet the atmosphere is entirely different during the mussar shiurim, which are designed to expound Torah fundamental ethical principles and practices. The delivery is formal, typically with awe, and no audience interruption happens. Any questions are left until the teacher may be approached in a less formal situation. ¶¶