

Moses in Berlin

Ki Tissa, Exodus, Chapters 32-34 | February 17, 2022

In the Gemäldegalerie Museum in Berlin hangs Rembrandt's Moses. A title for the painting is given in German: "*Moses zerschmettert die Gesetzestafeln*," "Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law." Interpreted this way, the artist is giving us Moses at the moment of the Israelites' greatest sin: their act of idolatry that brought about the shattering of the covenant. But we can instead understand this work another way: as recreating not the moment of ancient Israel's most egregious act, but rather the greatest moment in Moses' life.

Moses ascends Sinai to receive the tablets, stone symbols of the covenant binding Israel to the Torah. And as he disappears into the mists of the mountain, Israel grows nervous, then desperate:

And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together onto Aaron, and said unto him, Come, let us make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him. (Exodus 32:1)

A golden calf is created and served, and the Almighty is enraged:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Go, get thee down; for thy people that thou brought out of the land of Egypt have dealt corruptly.

They have turned aside quickly from the path which I commanded them...

Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them. And I will make of thee a great nation. (Exodus 32:7-8, 10)

We must take note of the possessive pronouns here. God informs Moses that Israel is "thy people," *your* people, rather than God's. But as we know, if there was anyone who could have made a claim of Israelite disaffiliation, it was Moses. Moses never experienced slavery, never grew up in servitude, and never asked to lead Israel. It was the Almighty who made use of his own bond to Israel in order to draft Moses into service. "*I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*," he said at the burning bush. Moses, in his response to God on Sinai, then takes the possessive pronouns and turns them around.

And Moses besought the Lord, his God, and said, Lord, why does thy wrath wax hot against thy people that thou hast brought out of the land of Egypt...? (Exodus 32:11)

Moses thus refuses the Almighty's offer to father a new nation, to become the new Abraham. It was familial love of Israel, and connection to Abraham that drew Moses to his mission. Giving up on that love to found a new family, all his own, was unthinkable to Moses. Speaking from the burning bush, God had introduced himself to Moses as the God of Moses' fathers. Now Moses does the same to God, and God relents and refrains from destroying Israel. But true forgiveness has not yet been granted. And even Moses cannot hold back his anger entirely:

And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets...

And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tablets out of his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. (Exodus 32:16, 19)

Rabbinic tradition celebrates Moses for his actions in

this moment. There is one Jew, however, who did not approve: Sigmund Freud, who thought that Moses was wrong to give into anger. Freud was obsessed with Michelangelo's statue of Moses in Rome. He sat for some time before it and wrote an essay about it. Freud argued that Michelangelo gives us a Moses that clutches the tablets to himself, refusing to break them, that the artist actually changes the story in Exodus. Or as Freud put it:

Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the Pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses. He has modified the theme of the broken Tablets; he does not let Moses break them in his wrath...

Personally, I find Freud's thesis both preposterous and fascinating: preposterous, because I cannot believe that the statue made for the tomb of a Pope would reverse the story found in Scripture. Fascinating, because Freud is so convinced that this is true, that I'd love to do a Freudian analysis of a man who would come up with such an interpretation. But Freud is wrong artistically and theologically.

Rabbi J.H. Hertz eloquently summarizes the traditional Jewish view when he notes that unlike a child's petulance, what we see here in Moses is,

the moral feeling of *indignation* that sweeps over us whenever we see a great wrong committed; not because it injures *us*, as is always the case in anger, but because the wrong is an outrage against justice and right.

Moses breaking the tablets is a moment approved and embraced by Jewish tradition. And it is often assumed that this is the moment that Rembrandt gives us in his painting, for he shows us Moses holding the tablets aloft. But in Rembrandt's version, Moses does not appear all that angry. Let us go further in the story to find out if there is perhaps another scene in Scripture that might better match Rembrandt's great work of art.

The shattering of the tablets marks the continued

rupture between Israel and God. Israel will survive, but God still refuses to dwell among them. Moses continues his audacious advocacy:

Now if thou wilt forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from thy book which thou hast written. (Exodus 32:32)

Moses is essentially saying to God, "I am only here because of the claim that the story of this people makes on my life. If they are not to be forgiven, leave me out of this story."

Paradoxically, in arguing with God, Moses reveals why God chose him. The same man who risked himself for his brothers when they were threatened by the Egyptians is also willing to sacrifice for them when they are threatened by God Himself. Heroes in pagan antiquity are meant to grasp greatness offered by the gods. From that perspective, if the Divine offers to destroy Israel and make Moses into a nation, he ought eagerly to accept. But for sacred Scripture, it is the opposite. Moses, in refusing greatness, becomes great. And he, as it were, helps thereby reveal the truest, heretofore unknown, love and grace of God. For God does forgive and the tablets are forged anew:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Carve for thee two tablets of stone like the first; and I will write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which thou didst break...

And he hewed two tablets of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up onto Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. (Exodus 34:1,4)

For Jewish tradition, Moses ascends Sinai with the second set of tablets on the first day of the month of *Elul* and descends with them 40 days later on what now every year is Yom Kippur.

It is therefore both an eternal Day of Atonement and the day on which we remember the law being given again. Thus, law is tied to love and forgiveness.

Michael Wyschogrod once commented something to the effect of: “No Jew walks into synagogue on Yom Kippur and says, ‘God, give me exactly what I deserve.’” And that is precisely the point. Some see law and love as being in tension with one another. For Jews, however, the Torah, re-gifted on Yom Kippur, is simultaneously an embodiment of obligation and of love. Because the covenant has been forged in God’s forgiveness, therefore law itself becomes a symbol of love. Thus, at this moment, Moses achieves a greatness that was unattained even at the original Sinai revelation. Without Moses beseeching on our behalf, the covenant would be nonexistent, and Israel would be nonexistent.

Abraham founded us, but only Moses saved us and allowed us to receive the Torah again. In remaining part of his people, he thereby more fully emerges as their leader. And in bringing about God’s forgiveness, Moses then radiates the light of the Divine:

And it came to pass, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of testimony in his hands, when he came down from the mount, that Moses knew not that the skin of his face sent forth rays of light...
(Exodus 34:29)

The Hebrew here is “*ki karan or panav*.” The Vulgate Bible took the word “*karan*” to mean “horns,” because in Hebrew, “*keren*” is “horn,” which leads to the horns on Michelangelo’s Moses at the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome. But this is not what the verse means at all. For Jews, as Simon Schama once pithily put it, the difference between Rembrandt and his predecessors can be seen above all in the fact that, “Michelangelo’s Moses has horns; Rembrandt’s does not.”

“*Karan or panav*” is most accurately rendered as Moses being unaware that “*his face was shining*,” that it was radiant. This is exactly how Rembrandt reads it. As Schama notes, if you study his depiction of Moses descending the mount clutching the tablets, the very darkness of most of the scene on the canvas, “only makes such light as there is shine with greater intensity.”

Rembrandt, Schama writes, further hints to the common misunderstanding about Moses’ horns by euphemizing that tradition, transforming the actual excrescences that were commonplace in contemporary European prints of Moses and the 10 Commandments into “tufts of hair in the center of his pate.”

But if Rembrandt is emphasizing how Moses’ face shines, this occurs not when he breaks the first tablets, but when he restores the second. And this can hint to us that Rembrandt is not depicting Moses’ moment of anger at Israel’s idolatry. I therefore agree with Schama, who argues that what we are seeing in Rembrandt’s painting is Moses’ presenting Israel, not with the first set of tablets, but with the second. Those granted as a sign of Divine forgiveness. Rembrandt is thus giving us a moment of Moses’ profound greatness.

And with this in mind, the color of the canvas is noteworthy. Rembrandt presents us with a Sinai that is virtually a tawny brown monochrome with, as Schama put it,

the figure of the prophet coarsely clad and rough-cast as though extruded from the stone himself..

This is striking, because as many have noted, while the first set of tablets were given directly by God, the second set were carved by Moses, “extruded” by Moses, one might say, from the stone.

Moses is told by the Almighty, “*Carve for thee two tablets of stone*.” This second set was painstakingly crafted by Moses through human effort. And only then did God write the words of the Decalogue upon them. The first set of tablets was brought miraculously into being by the fiery finger of God, but the second set was made, at least in part, by Moses by Moses—80 years of age—through the extraordinary exertion of an octogenarian.

The granting of the tablets on Yom Kippur is perhaps the greatest moment in Moses’ life, and I am grateful to my teacher, Rabbi Rembrandt, for allowing me to experience it anew.

Discussion Questions:

1. Prior to the sin of the Golden Calf, God has emphasized his close relationship with the People of Israel and their ancestors. What are we to make of God's calling the nation Moses' people after their sin? What is the meaning of God's language in this episode?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik argues that it is Moses' lack of desire for personal greatness that makes him such a worthy leader. What can this teach those of us who live in modern democratic societies about the men and women who seek to lead us and how we ought to choose them?