

This Shabbat is Ki Tissa. For the past few weeks of Torah reading, the narrative context has been that Moshe is sitting at the top of Mount Sinai, sent there as an emissary by the people who could not bear to hear the voice of God themselves. As he has been in on the mountain, he has been receiving the instructions about building the mishkan; the holy sanctuary, and about all of the details of priestly clothing – which I discussed last week – and the set-up of the sacrificial system.

But while Moshe is in a timeless state of divine encounter, the people below get restless. They worry that Moshe is gone, and they demand a replacement leader, which turns out to be the Golden Calf, one of the most disastrous incidents in Torah.

When the people begin to worship the Golden Calf, God's immediate response, which she articulates to Moshe, is to threaten to annihilate them all. In one of his finest moments as prophetic intermediary, Moshe steps directly up to face that divine wrath, and argues persuasively that Hashem essentially calm the heck down. It's effective: Chapter 32:14 says, "And Hashem renounced the punishment S/He had planned to bring upon His people.

This is not to say that Moshe himself is dispassionate. When he sees the people worshipping the Golden Calf with his own eyes, he throws the sacred tablets to the ground, shattering them. He rallies that people to kill the ringleaders and all who took part in worshipping the Golden Calf, and then he beseeches Hashem not to inflict any punishment on the larger collective.

As I read this parashah (particularly on this national Refugee Shabbat, sponsored by HIAS), I am struck by the discomfort of the role Moshe repeatedly plays between Hashem and the people. After the golden Calf, when Hashem refuses to continue to dwell among the people, Moshe has to exile himself, pitching a tent outside the camp for hashem to meet him. Then Moshe again goes up the mountain, receives a second audience with Hashem carves a second set of tablets, but this time, his brush with holiness leaves him even more estranged.

As chapter 34, verses 29-31 say:

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.

Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him.

But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them.

Moshe, throughout this parashah has put himself at great risk on behalf of the people. And the people are grateful to him. But they are also afraid of him. Why are they afraid of him?

According to Chizkuni, something about this divine encounter this last time on the mountain has actually transformed his appearance: "According to the plain meaning of the verse when they beheld him, they thought that they were looking at an angel."

But both Rashi and Rabbi Bahya suggest that it is not so much Moshe who is transformed, but the people, due to the sin of the Golden Calf: "As long as the people had not been guilty of the sin of the golden calf they had been able to see the attribute of כבוד penetrating seven different kinds of fire in doing so without becoming unnerved. We know this from Exodus 24,17 that "the appearance of the attribute of כבוד of the Lord was like fire consuming the top of the mountain, visible to the eyes of the Children of Israel." But now that they are guilty, the sight of divine glory on Moshe's face terrifies them.

I would suggest that perhaps it is also the very Otherness of Moshe's experience that terrifies them.

On this refugee Shabbat, I suggest that, just as the Israelite people themselves were refugees from slavery in Egypt, Moshe was in a compounded refugee situation: he was a stranger in his own community. He went through experiences that no one else did – that everyone else, in fact, refused to face – and the people were both grateful to him and fearful to him because of it.

Consider this statistic from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; “On average, 82 percent of refugees participate in the labor force, compared to the 62 percent national average. Refugees are twice as likely as native-born individuals to hold jobs in the service industry, and many industries like hospitality and meatpacking, now rely heavily on refugee workers. Across the U.S., the low number of refugee arrivals is putting an unnecessary strain on businesses, especially so in rural areas.”

HIAS also reports: ‘There are now estimated to be more than 80 million who have been forcibly displaced due to persecution and violence. 26.4 million of these people are refugees. . . .

Since the US Refugee Admissions Program’s inception, the United States has set an average refugee admissions goal of 96,229 refugees and, on average, has resettled 85,000 refugees annually. Prior to 2018, the Presidential Determination (number of refugees allowed in the US) only dipped below 70,000 once, in 1986 when it was set at 67,000. In some years, the U.S. resettled up to 200,000 refugees. In contrast, as of December 31, 2020, the United States was not on track to meet the historically low goal of 15,000 refugees because the administration used COVID as a reason to essentially ground the program to a halt.

Refugees are one kind of immigrant. There are of course also millions of asylum seekers worldwide, who have not officially been granted refugee status, as well economic and environmental migrants. Our own contemporary history as Jews

tells all too well the potential perils when the world closes all doors to migrants and refugees.

As the Israelite people needed and feared Moshe, so too does our society depend on the labor and courage of immigrants of all kind even as we fear them. Just as the Israelites did not want to deal with the particulars of Moshe's encounters on the mountain, we often wish not to hear, not to know about the trials that lead someone to leave home and seek a life in a new place.

If you are motivated by our own history, if you are motivated by our sacred mythology, I encourage you to take one of the advocacy steps at [HIAS.org](https://www.hias.org) (get-involved/take-action). We have an opportunity now to address old wrongs and more recent wrongs, and this time, to not shrink away from the face of the Other.