

# AN INNER LIGHT

## THEODORE STEINBERG

During the course of the synagogue year, we live with Moses for about nine months. We know him in various roles: diplomat, lawgiver, liberator, husband, father, son-in-law. We also know him as a modest man and a man with a speech defect. But there is one thing we do not know – what he looked like. We do not have the slightest idea of his appearance. Was he tall or short, clean-shaven or bearded? There is just one thing that we do know, and we are told about it in the portion *Ki Tissa* (Ex. 30:11-34:34).

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the second set of tablets with the Ten Commandments, *Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant* (34:29-35). His face shone. The brightness was so dazzling that he took to covering himself with a veil. He speaks to God face to face (33:11).

And that is all we know about the appearance of Moses. In the two best-known artistic renditions of Moses, the painting by Rembrandt depicts him with a shining face, holding tablets of black stone, engraved with letters of gold, and the statue by Michelangelo shows with horns protruding from his forehead. Those horns derive from a misunderstanding of the Hebrew word "*karan*," that the Vulgate Latin translation renders as "horn." But the figurative meaning in this passage is clearly "ray of light."

I do not suppose it makes much difference that we do not know what Moses looked like. It is what he did, and accomplished, that gives him stature. All the same, that image of the man with the radiant face is suggestive.

Once, a group of children from several local churches visited my synagogue. I took them into the sanctuary and spoke about various symbols, including the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Light that burns above the Holy Ark. I told them that we have the Eternal Light because of the verse in the Torah: *And you shall command the people of Israel that they bring pure olive oil to cause a lamp to burn continually . . .* A week or two after the visit, I received a package of thank-you letters from the children. One fifth grader wrote: "I really liked your explanation of that 'infernal light'." Another child

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called it, an "internal light." That one had stumbled on a big truth. There is such a thing as an internal light, and it may be the most important thing about us. It is the spark of Divinity, the light of God's image, that is in every person.

Moses, with the radiant face, had that internal light to an exceptional degree. And, if I may speculate, we all have some of it. It has also been called the light of conscience. As Byron wrote: "Whatever creed be taught or land be trod,/ Man's conscience is the oracle of God." The Bible describes that internal light with the words: *The spirit of a man is God's candle*. It may be our most distinctive quality: the light of intelligence and moral judgment. Maimonides expressed it in his commentary on the Mishnah: "What restrains a beast from doing harm is external – a bridle or a leash or a muzzle – but a human being's restraints lies within himself or herself. And self-restraint is a moral category.

Perhaps this all sounds too abstract. So here is a mundane illustration. Once I saw in the window of a little gift and souvenir shop a picture of a little boy who had enormous wistful eyes and hair flopping over his face, and wearing torn and tattered clothing. Around him were the words: "I know I'm somebody `cause God don't make no junk." For all the excess sentimentality and bad grammar, there is a big truth there. And that is what that inner light would seem to be about. It is saying: God made us, and He does not make junk. (This also happens to be the motto of the Marriage Encounter movement.) Therefore, we must be made of at least potentially good stuff. Maybe that is what that inner light is about. God's light in you and me. Let some shine out today.