After smashing the original stone tablets in anger at the construction of the Golden Calf, Moses again ascends the mountain to create a second set of tablets, and to plead to God on behalf of the errant Israelites. The prophet experiences a new level of closeness with Divinity, but returns to his people's camp physically marked by the experience: beams of light that shoot out from Moses' face, terrifying the children of Israel, who demand that their leader begins to cover his face as he reveals further revelation to the people.

The difficult work of negotiating the Israelites' relationship with the Divine is not without consequence, and Moses' struggle has manifested physically, marking him as one with the honor and the heartache of arbitrating between God and the people. In following his sacred mission, Moses has earned an unprecedented closeness with the Holy One, but at the same time sacrificed the relationship he once had with his people, who can no longer bear to look at his face.

This forfeiture of self is not unlike the one described by author bell hooks in her essay, “Altars of Sacrifice.” In her reflection on the work of Haitian-American artist Basquiat, hooks describes the way in which the painter ceded parts of his essential self in his art, in order to appeal to the white-dominated art world. Basquiat laid himself bare in order to access a cultural conversation, says hooks, that simultaneously appreciated his art but sensationalized his personhood. Basquiat’s art became not unlike Moses’ veil: a way to remain among people who could not encounter his full and fundamental self.

Like Moses, the project of Basquiat’s life that allowed him to connect with his audience, but brought with it both public connection and painful, private alienation. Moses, too, speaks readily to the people en masse, but now must engage from behind a veil, unseen. His message can be received by the Israelites, but his visage cannot—instead, Moses’ face is beheld only by God. Perhaps this is the key difference between the fulfilling life of the prophet, and the pain of the artist: Moses still had somewhere to go where he could still be wholly seen.

This Shabbat, may we work to reflect the same recognition from the Divine in our community, to see each other deeply in our fullest selves.

— Margo Hughes-Robinson
Ashorer Shirah

Ashorer shirah likhvod hatorah
Mipaz yekarah zakah u’varah

Ne’eman shemo bahar be’amo
Lih’yt lo lishmo ummah niv’arah

Niglah bikhvod, al sinai hodo
Kara le’avdo, lekabbel torah

Nittenah lanu al yad ro’enu
Mosheh rabbenu behir ha’ummah

Ne’eman beito hibbit bidmuto
Gam nevu’ato mar’ah me’irah

Yismah yisra’el be’ahavat el
Ki hu manhil el lomdei torah

Rabbah ne’imah torah temimah
Peti mahkimah ayin me’irah

I will compose songs to honor the Torah
More precious than gold, bright and pure
The Faithful One chose His nation
To be His nation chosen for His name
He revealed His majesty at Sinai in His glory
He called His servant to receive the Torah
It was given to us by our shepherd
Our teacher, Moses, chosen one of the nation

Faithful in His house, he saw His image
His prophecy was a clear vision
Let Israel rejoice in God’s love
He gives inheritance to those who learn Torah
The perfect Torah is very delightful
Making fools wise, lighting up eyes
— Translation by Abigail Denemark

Refa Tziri

Refa tziri El ne-eman / ki ata rofe uman
At roshi shur halshi / veten koah lenafshi

Petah sha’ar harahamim / ram shokhen bameromim
Al ’avdak sim hasdak / ein merahem b’al’adak

El hai retze tefilati / ve’usha le’ezrati
Bimehera deror kera / le’am ben hagevira

Heal my pain, steadfast God, for you are an artful healer.
Guide me, see my weakness, and strengthen my soul.

Open the gate of compassion, exalted One who dwells above.
Bestow Your loving kindness on Your servant, no one is as merciful as You.

Living God, accept my prayer, hasten to my help,
and speedily proclaim freedom for the people of Sara’s child.

—Rabbi Raphael Antebi Tabbush (Aleppo, 1830-1918)