

Parashat Shemot

Every Jew a Burning Bush

Parashat Shemot introduces us to Moshe, who is chosen by God to lead His people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai and beyond. But the Torah never spells out what made Moshe in particular worthy of this heavy mantle of leadership. A heartwarming Midrash fills this gap.

A little lamb ran off in the Sinai Desert. Moshe tracked it so he could return it to the flock. He espied the lamb drinking from a stream and realized that it had merely been thirsty. He remarked, “I did not know that you ran all this way because you were thirsty. You must be tired.” He hoisted the lamb onto his shoulder and carried it back to the flock. Thereupon, God said, “You who tend to the sheep with such compassion will be a compassionate leader for my flock, Israel.”¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik commented that animals cannot talk, making this lamb a symbol of muteness, silence, submissiveness. The lamb was thirsty but neither protested, nor grumbled, nor sighed. God’s agent in freeing the downtrodden slaves would have to be someone concerned for the weak and defenseless “lamb” that could not speak up for itself.²

It was in the midst of such shepherding with care that God decided to reveal Himself to Moshe for the first time through the burning bush. Upon seeing the spectacle, Moshe mused, “Let me turn aside now and see this great sight—why the bush does not burn up” (Exodus 3:3). In a number of insights, the Rav unpacks the significance of this momentous meeting between man and God.

(1) The Visual: A Burning Core

What does it mean that the angel of God appeared to Moshe “in a flame of fire (בְּלֶבֶת אֵשׁ) from the middle of the bush” (Exodus 3:2)? What did Moshe actually see?

According to Rashi, it means “a flame of fire, the heart of fire” (לְבוֹ שֵׁל אֵשׁ). The Rav understood this to mean that the bush was roughly circular and the fire was in the center, or the “heart,” of it. Moshe was intrigued by the fact that the fire was not spreading to the periphery of the bush and asked himself, “What type of fire is limited to a point and does not spread?”

Moshe had lost faith in his Israelite brothers and sisters after witnessing a fight between two of them—whom the Sages identified as Datan and Aviram—and unsuccessfully attempting to break it up.³ The restriction of the fire’s spread was intended to visually instruct Moshe that the Jews of Egypt might have appeared externally cold, but they carried a torch for God in their

¹ *Exodus Rabbah*, 2:2.

² Goldscheider, *Night That Unites*, 150.

³ See Rashi on Exodus 2:13.

hearts.⁴ Every Jew has a *ratzon elyon*, a sublime yearning, to do that which is right. When we look at people, we must always search for their virtues.

The Rav once observed:

There is now a tendency towards isolation in our Orthodoxy. I have never seen it before. I have lived in many countries and among many people, it did not exist. Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, my grandfather, never excluded a single Jew. A single Jew. And, by not excluding, not expelling, by not excommunicating, by not speaking ill when somebody passed by... If Moshe would have excommunicated the Jews of Egypt who knows what would have happened to us.⁵

The Rav expanded on this theme by quoting the following Midrash: “I have surely seen (רָאָה (רָאִיתִי) the affliction of My people’ (Exodus 3:7)—the Holy One said to Moshe, I see two sights (רָאִיתִי).”⁶ Having witnessed Jew-on-Jew violence, Moshe could only see the Jewish people from one perspective, and he saw a people unworthy of redemption. Through the visual spectacle of the burning bush and His verbal declaration here, God showed Moshe that He can see more than one facet of the Jewish people. When one’s vision can penetrate into the depths of the Jewish heart, one recognizes that the Jew quests for freedom and for God.⁷

The Rav’s beautiful interpretation appears to echo an insight of his great-grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik. After so many years in exile and slavery, the Jewish people lost the sense of their own true greatness. Rabbi Soloveitchik gave the example of a wealthy man who became impoverished and could no longer conjure the nobility he once felt and the confidence he exuded. But God declares, “I have surely seen” what the affliction has done to them, and I know their true self.⁸ To use the Midrash’s language, the “two sights” do not contrast with Moshe’s stale image of the Jewish people, but with their own distorted self-perception.

(2) *The Audio: God’s Voice*

This historic event opened the lines of communication between the Master of the Universe and Moshe. The verse says that God called to him, “Moshe, Moshe” (Exodus 3:4), but in what voice? Based on the mention of “your father” (Exodus 3:6), the Midrash claims it was the voice of Moshe’s father Amram.⁹ For a moment Moshe thought his father Amram was somehow present, that he had ventured into the wilderness to inquire after his welfare. The Rav explained the significance of this:

⁴ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:22.

⁵ Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Exodus*, 18–19.

⁶ *Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot*, §20.

⁷ Schreiber, *Noraos HaRav*, 8:77-78.

⁸ *Beit ha-Levi, Shemot*, s.v. רָאָה רָאִיתִי אֶת עֲנֵי אֲמִי גו’.

⁹ *Exodus Rabbah*, 3:1.

The mere fact that Amram's voice was the medium or the implement which the Almighty chose in order to get acquainted with Moshe tells us something very important. It's important to the modern Jew, perhaps even more so than it was to Moshe.¹⁰

The Rav goes on to say that many people he interacted with over the years shied away from Judaism because they said it is too rigid. They said that the biblical God is angry, vengeful, and vindictive; the Father in Heaven stern and unforgiving. But this is patently false, as Judaism has both paternal and maternal aspects, and is full of sympathy and love.

The Rambam, the great halachist and philosopher, is often described as an arch-rationalist. Yet look at how he describes, the Rav pointed out, a Jew's relationship with God:

What is the proper love? A person should love God exceedingly, extremely intensely, until his soul is bound to love of God, and he is obsessed with it. Like the lovesick, who cannot take their minds off loving that woman with whom he is unceasingly obsessed.... A person's love for God should be greater than this.¹¹

We are bidden to relate to God with an intense, passionate love, as with someone who deeply cares about us and loves us in return.

At the burning bush, Moshe held an unfavorable view of the Jewish people.¹² The Holy One had to convince him he was making a mistake about the Jewish people, which He preceded to do through the signs. The message of the first encounter with Moshe, then, is that the Almighty is, at it were, a tender and doting parent.

(3) *The Call: Being Moved*

Something extraordinary caught Moshe's eye in the scrub, and his inner monologue says: "Let me turn aside now and see this great (*ha-gadol*) sight" (Exodus 3:3). Note that the burning bush is not described as *nifla*, miraculous. The Rav asserted that the fact that it was supernatural did not interest Moshe. He sensed that in this moment everything would change, and that was the most important, defining feature of the encounter. "A great event means that it produces results. If it changes the person. If it ushers in a new era. On the other hand, an event, no matter how miraculous it is, is very small if it is wasted."¹³

The Rav elaborated on this idea by comparing the two Hebrew words for a miracle: *pele* and *neis*. A *pele* is something one does not understand, as it says in the Song at the Sea, "Who is like You... who works wonders (*fele*)" (Exodus 15:11). The Jewish people watch in awe, astounded by a God they will never truly understand as He works His miracles against the Egyptians. A *neis* in Biblical Hebrew has the meaning of a banner or hoisted flag, which is

¹⁰ Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Shemos*, 25–26.

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, 10:3.

¹² See Rashi on Exodus 3:11-12.

¹³ Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Shemos*, 21–22.

meant to rally people around it. Unlike the *pele*, it calls for a response and is meant to elevate those who witness it.¹⁴

Based on this categorization, the burning bush was not labeled “miraculous” (*nifla*) because it was more of a *neis* than a *pele*. It was a “great sight” because it called Moshe to completely change his life and take on the divine mission, which after some hesitation he did. When Moshe thought “let me turn aside,” he was not only turning to the bush but to himself.¹⁵ He realized that his inner talents were being called upon by God and that he had to respond to this *neis*.

(4) *The Response: Preserving Humanity*

After God identified Himself as the God of Moshe’s ancestors, Moshe responded nonverbally: “Moshe hid his face because he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6). The Talmud debates whether this act was praiseworthy or not. Rav Yonatan maintains that because of this response his face shone, the people feared him, and he ultimately beheld God, in a sense.¹⁶ Why was it meritorious to hide, wondered the Rav, when the light of the Infinite called to him and would have explained to him the mysteries of the universe, such as why the righteous suffer? Moshe had a direct connection to God like no other prophet, so why did he not seize the opportunity to learn instead of retreating?

The Rav suggested, remarkably, that Moshe feared total knowledge of the universe. If Moshe had not turned away, he would have lost his humanity. If he were to fathom God’s ways, he would understand how there is no objective evil. How would he be able to sympathize with the plight of the poor, the suffering of the ill, the bad luck of his fellow Jew, if he could see how all of them were just in the divine orchestration of all things? The ills that befall man must be treated as evil and fought against with compassion and love, prayer and good deeds. So great was Moshe’s love for his people that he sacrificed the most sublime human striving, the knowledge of God, for the preservation of his human compassion.¹⁷

This final lesson from the Rav brings to mind a wonderful Chassidic teaching:

There is a saying that everything in the world is here for the service of God. Somebody once came to the Rebbe of Alexander and asked him how can you serve God by being an atheist? The Rebbe answered that you have to be an atheist when someone asks a favor of you. If you believe in God, then deep down you’ll think, “I’ll pray for you, I’ll bless you, but I don’t have to do anything, because God will do it.” So when someone asks a favor of you... you have to be a complete atheist because God won’t do anything for him, you have got to do it!¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 22–23.

¹⁵ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:22.

¹⁶ *Berachot* 7a.

¹⁷ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 2:25.

¹⁸ Mandelbaum, *Holy Brother*, 155.