**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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**Parashat Shemot:**

**The Vision of the Burning Thornbush**

**From *Bereishit* to *Shemot*:**

**Summation and Introduction**

All through the *parashot* of the Book of *Bereishit,* we have dealt with the *derashot* of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel in *Bereishit Rabba*. To begin this *shiur,* I wish to discuss a number of characteristics of this Midrashic work.

First, let us consider certain structural and formal characteristics. *Bereishit Rabba* is an exegetical work of Midrash with many *petichtot*, which comb through the words and language of the Torah and connect verse to verse. At the beginning of a new *parasha*, there are several *petichtot* on the first verse. In addition, there is the phenomenon of pointing out patterns of meaning in the language of the *Tanakh* (for example: "Everywhere that it says *‘Vehaya’*").

Throughout these *derashot*, we have encountered Tannaitic disagreements regarding aggadic or biblical exegesis (Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nechemya), and diverse or contradictory *derashot* of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel. Many Greek and Aramaic words are also embedded in *Bereishit Rabba*, and there are strings of key sentences, usually throughout the beginning of the *parasha.* In the text*,* statements are prominently reported in the name of their authors across the generations. In this way, we have encountered the clear aggadic tradition of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel.

In the conceptual realm, let us point out two features of *Bereishit Rabba*. One of its salient features is the link between the Torah and the concrete existential circumstances and struggles of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel — famine, retaining possession of Eretz Israel, Torah centers in Babylonia, taxes, the Roman Empire, the Galilee as a Torah center — and the values-based questions that emerge from them. We have further seen that throughout the work, as we pay careful attention to the succession of *derashot,* we may appreciate conceptual issues harmoniously woven into a symphony of interpretation.

Through our studies, we have been privileged to spend a small amount of time with the sages who delve into the wording of the Torah, to consider their life-stories deeply and to make direct connections between their personal experiences and their exegesis.

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As we move on to the Book of *Shemot*, we will focus on the development of the ideas and *derashot* of the Sages, from the Tannaim and Amoraim of Eretz Israel to the late Midrashic works.[[1]](#footnote-1) For *Parashat Shemot,* we will examine the vision of the burning thornbush, in particular the question of why God choose this method to reveal himself to Moshe.

**The Vision of the Thornbush as a Parable of the Bondage and Distress of the *Shekhina***

The revelation in the vision of the thornbush is widely addressed by the Tannaim of the school of Rabbi Akiva:[[2]](#footnote-2)

"Now Moshe was keeping the flock… And the angel of the Lord appeared to him" (*Shemot* 3:1-2)

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak to Moshe out of the midst of a thornbush? Just as the thornbush is the prickliest of all the trees in the world, for any bird that enters does not emerge unscathed, so too Israel's servitude in Egypt was the most grievous servitude in the world. Never did there leave Egypt an emancipated slave, man or woman, except for Hagar, as it is stated: "And Pharaoh gave men charge concerning him" (*Bereishit* 12:20).

And from where do we know that Israel's servitude was the most grievous servitude in the world? As it is stated: "And the Lord said: I have surely seen (*ra'o ra'iti*)the affliction of My people" (*Shemot* 3:7). What is the meaning of “*ra'o ra'iti”*? Two times. After they drowned their children in water, they pressed them into buildings. This may be likened to one who took a stick and beat two people with it, so that both of them received a wound from the stick. So Israel's servitude in Egypt was the most grievous servitude in the world; and it was revealed and known to God. Therefore it is stated: "For I know their pains" (*Shemot* 3:7).

Rabbi Eliezer says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with him from the thornbush? Just as the thornbush is the lowliest of trees in the world, so Israel descended to the lowermost level, and God descended with them and redeemed them. As it is stated: "And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egypt" (*Shemot* 3:8).

Rabbi Yehoshua says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the thornbush? When Israel went down to Egypt, the *Shekhina* went down with them. As it is stated: "I will go down with you [into Egypt]" (*Bereishit* 46:4). When they went up, the *Shekhina* went up with them. As it is stated: "And I will surely bring you up again (*a’alkha gam alo*)" (*Bereishit* 46:4). When they went down into the sea, the *Shekhina* was with them. As it is stated: "And the angel of God removed [and went behind them]" (*Shemot* 14:19). When they came to the wilderness, the *Shekhina* was with them. As it is stated: "And in the wilderness, where you have seen [how the Lord your God bore you]" (*Devarim* 1:31).

Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Yehuda say: Come and see the mercies of He Who spoke and the world came into being. For as long as Israel was in distress, affliction, as it were, was before Him. As it is stated: "In all their affliction, He was afflicted" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9). I only know about communal distress. From where do I know about personal distress? Therefore the verse states: "He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble" (*Tehillim* 91:15).

And similarly it is stated: "Surely, he that touches you [touches the apple of his eye (*eino*)]" (*Zekharya* 2:12). Rabbi Yehuda says: The verse should not have read [*eino* with] a *vav*, but rather [*eini* with] a *yud* (My eye). This teaches that whoever harms a member of Israel, harms, as it were, He Who spoke and the world came into being. As long as Israel dwell in ease, the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells in ease with them and in joy. And so it is stated: "That I may behold the prosperity of Your chosen [that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation]" (*Tehillim* 106:5).

Rabbi Yosei the Galilean says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the thornbush? Because it is ritually pure, as the nations of the world do not make it an idol.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Arakh says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the thornbush? Surely He should have spoken from the cedars of Lebanon or from the mountaintops or the hilltops. Rather, the Holy One, blessed be He, lowered His *Shekhina* and made His word the way of the land, so that the nations of the world not say: Because He is God and master of His world, He did His word unjustly. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, detained Moshe for six days, and on the seventh day he said to Him: "Send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send" (*Shemot* 4:13), as it is stated: "And Moshe said to the Lord: O Lord, I am not a man of words" (*Shemot* 4:10).

This may be likened to a king who had a slave and loved him with absolute love. The king wanted to appoint him as his trustee to maintain the members of the royal palace. What did the king do? He seized the slave by his hand and brought him into his treasury, and showed him silver vessels and gold vessels, jewels and pearls, and everything that he had in his treasury. Afterwards, he took him out and showed him trees, and gardens, and orchards, and enclosures, and everything that he had in his fields. Then the slave seized him by his hand and said: I cannot be a trustee to maintain the members of the royal palace. The king said to him: Since you cannot be a trustee, why did you trouble Me with all this trouble? And the king was angry with him and decreed that he not enter his palace.

In this way the Holy One, blessed be He, detained Moshe for six days, and on the seventh day he said to Him: "Send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom You will send." The Holy One, blessed be He, took an oath concerning him that he would not enter Eretz Israel, as it is stated: "Therefore you shall not bring [this assembly into the land which I have given them] (*Bamidbar* 20:12). (*Mekhilta de-Rashbi*, 3, 2)

The speakers in the *Mekhilta* are from two generations: four from the sages of Yavneh — Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yosei the Galilean, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh; and one disciple of Rabbi Akiva — Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, there is room to wonder about the order in which they appear, which is not in the chronological order of the speakers.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The remarks of four of the Tannaim in the *Mekhilta* are directed to the context of the verses. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua relate to the servitude of the people of Israel in Egypt, whereas Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh relates to the issue of Moshe's acceptance of leadership. In contrast, Rabbi Yosei the Galilean relates to the general issue of how God reveals Himself in the world. The *Mekhilta* records the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh in a more expansive manner. This seems to indicate the centrality of the idea emerging from their words for the entire passage.

We will try below to offer an explanation for the order of the appearance of the various sages in the *Mekhilta.* The words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, which are inserted at the beginning of the passage, present the reality of the servitude in Egypt from Israel's perspective, whereas Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua relate to its meaning from God's perspective. While God goes down to rescue His people, in accordance with the words of Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua points to the *Shekhina* going into exile along with Israel.

The words of Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Chiya that are placed as a continuation of the words of Rabbi Yehoshua sharpen the idea that exile is a sharp reality of Divine distress. The idea contained in the words of Rabbi Yosei the Galilean is a continuation of the words of Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Chiya in that, according to him, God's glory is almost never revealed in this world. Whereas Rabbi Yehoshua relates to the "shared destiny" of God and the people of Israel, Rabbi Yosei focuses on the religious norms prevailing in human society.

It seems that the compiler of the *Mekhilta* wishes to conclude with the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh. This clearly emerges from the flowery, effusive formulation of the question: "Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the thornbush? Surely He should have spoken from the cedars of Lebanon or from the mountaintops or the hilltops." His answer relates to the discussion conducted between God and Moshe regarding his acceptance of leadership in the following verses. On the one hand, the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh relate not to distress, but to a solution for the situation presented in the remarks of the earlier Sages, through the appointment of Moshe as the leader who will take the people out of their bondage. However, according to what he says, the vision of the thornbush embodies a contraction of God's glory toward Moshe, in order to allow him to freely accept upon himself the mission.

The parable brought at the end of the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh emphasizes Moshe's freedom in the face of God's "need," as it were, that he accept the mission, and God's "anger" against the backdrop of the great effort, as it were, unsuccessfully invested in persuading him. It also reflects God's contraction into the world of concealment, the affliction of the *Shekhina*, and *Chazal'*sdefinition of the leader of the nation as one who is prepared to turn God's distress into his individual challenge.

From where does the question raised by the Tannaim stem? The formulation of the question that echoes five times, "Why did the Holy One, blessed be, reveal Himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moshe from the thornbush?" raises a contradiction between God and the manner in which He reveals Himself in the world.

Their question does not appear to be the philosophical question with which the classical authorities of Jewish thought, such as Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi and the Rambam, struggle, but rather a question about how God reveals Himself here, in the prophetic vision to Moshe when God wants to appoint him as the leader of Israel. Their answer teaches an important principle regarding the prophets: the vision revealed to the prophet accords with the reality that God wishes to repair on different levels, partly at the level of historical-external reality, and partly at the level of internal reality— in God and in man.

The Tannaitic *derashot* proceed and develop throughout Rabbinic literature, but the paths of the various *derashot* are not all equal. Some are mentioned rarely, others often. Some are mentioned in subsequent generations, others only much later.

The *derashot* in *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* about the burning thornbush are hardly mentioned in the Midrashic literature of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the other hand, in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* and in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*, we find a different answer regarding the meaning of the revelation to Moshe at the thornbush, though it too is offered by one of the Tannaim:[[6]](#footnote-6)

A certain non-Jew asked Rabban Gamliel:

Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, reveal Himself to Moshe in a thornbush?

He said to him: Had He revealed Himself to him in a carob tree or in a fig tree, what would you have said?

Rather, no place on earth is void of the *Shekhina*. (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 1, “*Vayhi be-yom kallot”*)

Rabban Gamliel's answer is the polar opposite, with regard to its content, of the answer given by Rabbi Yosei the Galilean. Rabbi Yosei the Galilean points to the thornbush as one of the few places in which God could have rested His *Shekhina*, whereas, according to Rabban Gamliel, the *Shekhina* rests even on a thornbush.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**The Symbolism of the Vision at the Thornbush in the Late Midrash**

The preoccupation with the symbolism of the vision of the thornbush returns in the late Midrash. In *Midrash Tanchuma,* we find a single anonymous statement that combines the statement of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai with that of Rabbi Yehoshua:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Why from a thornbush, and not from a different tree? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "I will be with him in trouble" (*Tehillim* 91:15). They are in servitude, and I will reveal Myself from a different tree? Therefore, from a thornbush, which is wholly covered in thorns. (*Midrash Tanchuma Buber*, *Shemot* 12)

This statement appears at the end of a section that assigns symbolic meaning to the wording of the text in the story of the vision at the thornbush in *Shemot* 3:1-5. It lacks the sting of the words of Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Yehuda, that even God Himself, as it were, is in trouble, and the symmetry between the situation of the people of Israel and that of God finds expression only at the site of the revelation.

This idea returns in another late Midrashic work, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, with new symbolism:

Why did the Blessed One show Himself to Moshe out of the midst of the thornbush?

Rather, the fire is Israel, who are likened to fire, as it is stated: "And the house of Yaakov shall be a fire, and the house of Yosef a flame" (*Ovadya* 1:18).

“And the thornbush” — these are the nations of the world who are likened to thorns and thistles.

He said to him: This is the way that Israel will be among the nations?

Rather, the fire of Israel will consume the nations who are likened to thorns and thistles.

But the nations of the world will not extinguish the flame of Israel, which is from the words of Torah.

In the future, the fire of Israel will consume the nations that are likened to thorns.

As it is stated: "And the peoples shall be as the burnings of lime" (*Yeshayahu* 33:12). (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*)

In the Tannaitic *derashot,* significance is attached to the lowliness or prickliness of the thornbush (in the *derasha* of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai that one who enters a thornbush cannot emerge from it unscathed). In this *derasha,* the thorns and the fire bear the symbolic meaning of Jewish survival in exile, and victory over the other nations in the future.

The symbolism of the revelation to Moshe in the thornbush is broadly addressed in *Shemot Rabba*:

"And the angel of the Lord appeared to him" (*Shemot* 3:2).

"My perfect one (*tamati*)" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:2)… Rabbi Yannai said: As in the case of twins (*te'omim*), if one has a headache, the other one feels it, the Holy One, blessed be He, says, as it were: "I will be with him in trouble" (*Tehillim* 91:15). And it is stated: "In all their affliction He was afflicted" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9).

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: If you do not feel that I am distressed, just as Israel is distressed, know the place from which I speak with you, from the midst of the thorns. As it were, I share with them their distress.

"From the midst of the thornbush."

A certain non-Jew asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha: What did the Holy One, blessed be He, see that He spoke with Moshe from the midst of the thornbush? He said to him: Had [He spoken to him] from the midst of a carob tree or from the midst of a sycamore tree, would you have asked me like that? But I cannot dismiss you without an answer. Why from the midst of the thornbush? Because there is no place void of the *Shekhina*, even the thornbush.

… Rabbi Eliezer says: Just as the thornbush is the lowliest of all trees, so too Israel was the lowliest of all the nations, inferior in Egypt. And therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to them and redeemed them. As it is stated: "And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egypt" (*Shemot* 3:8).

Rabbi Yosei says: Just as the thornbush is the prickliest of all the trees, and any bird that enters into it does not emerge unscathed, so too Israel's servitude to Egypt was to the Holy One, blessed be He, the most grievous servitude in the world.

… And Rabbi Yochanan says: Just as this thornbush grows next to water, so Israel grow only by virtue of the Torah which is likened to water. As it is stated: "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come you for water" (*Yeshayahu* 55:1).

Just as this thornbush grows in the garden and along the river, so is Israel in this world and in the World to Come.

Just as the thornbush is made into a hedge for a garden, so Israel is a hedge for the world.

Just as the thornbush sends out thorns and it sends out roses, so Israel has in its midst righteous people and wicked people.

Rabbi Pinchas bar Chama said: Just as this thornbush: when a person enters his hand within it, he does not feel anything; but when he removes it, he removes it scratched. So too when Israel went down to Egypt, nobody noticed them. When they went out: "By signs, and by wonders, and by war."

Rabbi Yehuda bar Rabbi Shalom says: Just as this thornbush, when a bird enters within it, it does not feel anything, but when it goes out, its feathers are plucked, so too when Avraham went down to Egypt, nobody noticed him. But when they went out: "And the Lord plagued Pharaoh" (*Bereishit* 12:17).

Another explanation: What is "from the midst of the thornbush"? Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said: Among all the trees, some of them produce one leaf, while others produce two or three. A myrtle produces three, as it is called: "bows of thick trees" (*Vayikra* 23:40). But a thornbush has five leaves. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Israel will be redeemed only by virtue of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov; and by your virtue; and by that of Aharon.

Another explanation: “The thornbush” — He informed him that he would live to be a hundred and twenty years old, the numerical value of *ha-seneh*. (*Shemot Rabba*, ed. Shinan, 2, 5)

In this source, there are many references to the symbolism in God's revelation to Moshe at the burning thornbush. It first brings some of the comments of the Tannaim in the *Mekhilta* (Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai, in the name of Rabbi Yosei; Rabbi Eliezer; an adaptation of Rabbi Yehoshua as in the *Tanchuma*), and also the *derasha* of the Tanna Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha. Afterwards it records additional symbolic meanings of the thornbush, in the name of four Amoraim of Eretz Israel, and an anonymous statement dealing with the numerical vale of the letters in the word “*ha-seneh.”* In contrast to most of the *derashot* from the *Mekhilta*, some of the *derashot* that are attributed to the Amoraim are completely disconnected from the context of the verse, and are related to the symbolism of the traits of the thornbush in connection to the people of Israel in general.

Thus, we witness an interesting phenomenon in the history and development of the *derashot* of *Chazal*: The issue of the symbolic meaning of God's revelation in the thornbush appears at the beginning and the end of Midrashic literature, in the words of the Tannaim and in the late Midrash composed in the Middle Ages. It seems that the question that disturbs the Tannaim regarding the contradiction between the greatness of God and His revelation in the world is not raised with the same severity. Over the course of the generations, the answers that are given turn the question mark into an exclamation point, bearing great faith in God's closeness to His chosen people, the people of Israel, across time and the border wall of exile. We witness the effect of aggadic material on religious consciousness, from the time of the Tannaim in the first century CE to the first half of the period of the Rishonim, the time of the appearance of *Shemot Rabba*, a thousand years later.

**The Symbolism of the Vision of the Burning Thornbush in the Babylonian Talmud**

In the *derashot* of the Tannaim and in the *derashot* appearing in the late Midrash, the vision of the burning thornbush is always expounded in connection to the people of Israel and God, in the context of the servitude in Egypt or over the course of Israel's exile. In the Babylonian Talmud, the vision of the burning thornbush is given an entirely different symbolic meaning, and it is expounded as an expression of the value of lowliness and humility:

O thornbush, O thornbush, not because you are higher than all other trees did the Holy One, blessed be He, cause His *Shekhina* to rest upon you, but because you are lower than all other trees did He cause His *Shekhina* to rest upon you. (*Shabbat* 67a)

In contrast to the other *derashot* about the thornbush throughout Rabbinic literature, this *derasha* emphasizes the lowliness of the thornbush as the reason that God rests His *Shekhina* upon it.

In Tractate *Gittin,* we read:

Rav Acha from Bei Choza’a expounds [it as follows]: If a man has just cause of complaint against his neighbor for taking away his livelihood, and yet holds his peace, He that abides in the thornbush will espouse his cause. (*Gittin* 7a)

God's ability to bear the bondage of the people of Israel is shifted to empathy on the part of God for the individual who is capable of restraining himself in the face of an injustice committed against him by another person.

Therefore, alongside the Tannaitic tradition transmitted through the late Midrash, we find in Rabbinic literature another tradition regarding the symbolic meaning of the thornbush.[[9]](#footnote-9)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Regarding later Midrash and the *Tanchuma* literature, see: Anat Raisel, *Mavo La-midrashim* (Alon Shevut: 5772). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This statement does not appear in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael.* It should be emphasized that in both versions of the *Mekhilta,* it begins in an orderly manner at *"Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem*"in *Parashat Bo.* In *Mekhilta de-Rashbi*, there are two passages before that, one relating to *Parashat Shemot* and the other relating to *Parashat Va'era*. Regarding *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* and *Mekhilta de-Rashbi*, see Yona Frankel, *Midrash Ve-aggada*, Vol. 3 (Tel Aviv: 5757), pp. 721-730. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Chiya also appear, but not as authors of a *derasha* about the thornbush, but rather about the development of the idea of the symmetry between the state of the people of Israel and the state of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the most part, the Sages are presented in their proper chronological order throughout Rabbinic literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *derashot* on the verses, "In all their affliction He was afflicted" (*Yeshayahu* 63:9), and "He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble" (*Tehillim* 91:15), which appear in the *Mekhilta* in the name of Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Yehuda, appear many times in Rabbinic literature, but not in the context of the burning thornbush. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This *derasha* appears also in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 3, 2. The sage who is asked the question there is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha. According to both sources, the answer is given by a Tanna. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This might explain why it does not appear in the *Mekhilta*. In addition, it should be noted that Rabban Gamliel's words are presented as an answer to a question posed by a non-Jew. It is not clear who this Rabban Gamliel is, as more than one Tannna is known by this name. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This statement is taken from *Midrash Tanchuma*, ed. Buber, and it appears also in the printed *Tanchuma*. Midrashic scholars maintain that the Buber edition is the older, original version. The printed *Tanchuma* has undergone many adaptations in different periods. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We find a parallel process regarding the lowliness of Mount Sinai compared to all the other mountains in the sources of Eretz Israel, as opposed to those of Babylonia. See BT *Megila* 29a; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* 4; *Bereishit Rabba* 100; *Midrash Tehillim* 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)