YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat SHemot**

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Dedicated in memory of Henri ben Tsilaz”l

whose yahrtzeit is 24 Tevet

By Family Rueff

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**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**The Burning Bush**

Translated by David Strauss

### I.

And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died; and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up to God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak, and with Yaakov. And God saw the children of Israel, and God knew. (*Shemot* 2:23-25)

Three questions can be asked regarding this passage: 1) What is the connection between the death of the king of Egypt and the cry of Israel? 2) What is the connection between God's hearing Israel's groaning and His remembering the covenant with the patriarchs, given that God clearly never forgot the patriarchal covenant? 3) "And God knew" – What did He know?

The commentaries offer many different answers as to why the death of the king of Egypt caused a sigh of crying, and not a sigh of relief.

Some commentators (Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni) see in the verse two separate facts: the sigh of the children of Israel and the death of the king of Egypt. The sigh led to God's hearing their groaning and His decision to take action, whereas the death of the king of Egypt made it possible to send Moshe to Egypt, because those who wanted to kill him were now dead (see *Shemot* 4:19).

Others (Rashi, Ramban, and others) draw a connection between the death of the king and the cry, each commentator in his own way, and we too shall make our own suggestion. It is possible that the death of the cruel king of Egypt who had imposed a death sentence on the children of Israel did, in fact, ease the bondage somewhat. It was this easing of the bondage that enabled Israel's sighing and crying. When the children of Israel were persecuted from head to toe and they were fighting a desperate battle of survival, every man for his own life and the lives of his family, no one had the strength to cry out and ask for total salvation. When the king of Egypt died, they could cry out to Heaven and even pray to the God of their fathers. God decided to act not only because of their bondage, but because of their prayer.

Regarding the connection between God's hearing the groaning of Israel and His remembering the covenant with patriarchs, we are inclined to say that there is no direct connection between them; they are in fact two different factors that led to separate results. We can explain this based on what is stated later in the *parasha*:

And the Lord said: I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their pains; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey; to the place of the Canaanite, and the Chitite, and the Amorite, and the Perizite, and the Chivite, and the Yevusite. (*Shemot* 3:7-8)

These verses describe two different missions: rescuing Israel from Egypt and bringing them up to the land of Canaan. God's hearing Israel's groaning brought Him to descend and save them from Egypt. The covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov brought Him to bring them up to the land of Canaan, which He had promised the patriarchs in the covenant that He made with them.

The obscure closing phrase, "and God knew," should also be understood in light of the aforementioned verses: "for I know their pains." The verse in chapter 2 means: "And God knew their pains," and we are dealing here with an abridged verse. As opposed to cries and groans, pains can neither be seen nor be heard, but it is possible to know them.

### II.

Now Moshe was keeping the flock of Yitro his father-in-law, the priest of Midyan; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, to Chorev. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moshe said: “I will turn aside now and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said: “Moshe, Moshe.” And he said: “Here am I.” And He said: “Draw not near here; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground. Moreover He said: I am the God of your father, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov.” And Moshe hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. (*Shemot* 3:1-6)

The account of the incident of the burning bush leads us to the question concerning Moshe's age when God revealed Himself to him. The commentators (Ramban on *Shemot* 3:23, and others) understand that Moshe was eighty years old at the time. Their reasoning is that the incident of the burning bush and Moshe's standing before Pharaoh prior to the ten plagues appear to have taken place close in time, and it is explicitly stated (7:7) that Moshe was eighty years old when he and his brother Aharon appeared before Pharaoh.

We will discuss this matter further when we reach *Parashat Vaera*, and there we will challenge this assumption. For the time being, we note that Moshe is portrayed here as a young and naïve shepherd living in his father-in-law's house – not as an elderly eighty-year-old man. This perspective obligates that we adopt a different calendar, as we will explain there. For now, let us examine the following *aggada*, which attempts to paint a picture of Moshe's character:

Moshe too was tested by way of the flock. Our Rabbis said: When Moshe was tending the flock of Yitro in the wilderness, a lamb ran off and he ran after it until he reached a shady spot. When he reached the shady spot, he happened upon a pool of water where the lamb stopped to drink. When Moshe reached the lamb, he said to it: I did not know that you ran off because you were tired and thirsty. He carried it on his shoulder and went off. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You have the compassion to tend the flock of man. By your life, you will tend My flock. This is: "And Moshe was keeping the flock of Yitro." (*Shemot Rabba* 2)

There is no hint in the verses to what is stated in this *aggada*, but it may be rooted in a comparison between the first leader of Israel (Moshe) and their first king (Shaul). Before we consider Shaul's path to leadership, let us follow the comparison between Moshe and Shaul as it emerges from the verses.

Before Shaul is appointed king, the Bible describes the background to the establishment of the monarchy:

Now the Lord had revealed to Shmuel a day before Shaul came, saying: Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man out of the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel, and he shall save My people out of the hand of the Pelishtim; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come to Me. (I *Shemuel* 9:15-16)

The style of this passage parallels what is stated in the account regarding the burning bush:

And the Lord said: I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt… And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to Me…. (*Shemot* 3:7-9)

Similarly, the great salvation in Shaul's first war against the Pelishtim parallels what is stated at the beginning of the Song of the Sea in Israel's first war against Egypt:

So the Lord saved Israel that day…. (I *Shemuel* 14:23)

This comparison brings us to follow Shaul's path to leadership:

Now the asses of Kish, Shaul's father, were lost. And Kish said to Shaul his son: “Take now one of the servants with you, and arise, go seek the asses.” (I *Shemuel* 9:3)

Shaul went to look for his father's asses. On the way, he happened upon Shmuel's city, and there he was appointed to deliver Israel from the hands of the Pelishtim.

*Chazal* describe Moshe in a similar fashion: While he was looking for his father-in-law's lost lamb, he stumbled upon the burning bush, and there he was appointed to deliver Israel from the hands of the Egyptians.

### III.

With whom did Moshe speak at the burning bush? The verses mention both God and His angel. The Ramban rejects the Ibn Ezra's explanation that this was an "ordinary" angel:

This is incorrect, for Moshe, the greatest of prophets, would not have hid his face from an angel. (Ramban, *Shemot* 3:2)

It appears from the Ramban that already in his youth Moshe was "the greatest of prophets," as is stated about him at the time of his death: "And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moshe" (*Devarim* 34:10).

According to our approach, however, it may be suggested, differently from the Ramban, that at this stage Moshe was simply a shepherd who was detached from his people. Despite all of his potential to redeem Israel and give them the Torah – as he had already proven before he ran away to Midyan, on the two days that he smote the Egyptian and rebuked his fellow Hebrew – he was not yet a prophet, and certainly not "the greatest of prophets," and at this stage, he hid his face from the angel.

Even the Ramban speaks about Moshe's encounter with an angel at the burning bush, but according to him, this is the greatest angel of all, "the redeeming angel," an angel who is "the face" of God, and according to *Chazal*, this is the angel Michael (or Metatron). Support for the Ramban's position can perhaps be brought from the parallel between the angel's instruction to Moshe to remove his shoes and the corresponding instruction – almost word for word – of the angel of God to Yehoshua:

And he said: “Draw not near here; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground.” (*Shemot* 3:5)

And the captain of the Lord's host said to Yehoshua: “Put off your shoe from off your foot; for the place whereon you stand is holy.” (*Yehoshua* 5:15)

The angel depicted in *Yehoshua* is "the captain of the Lord's host" (the greatest of angels), who stands up for Israel in their time of trouble both in Egypt and in the war against Yericho. It is he who will also stand up for Israel in the pre-Messianic period, on that day of great trouble on the eve of salvation:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, **the great prince** who stands for the children of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time…. (*Daniel* 12:1)

### IV.

And, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. (*Shemot* 3:2)

What is the meaning of the bush that burns with fire but is not consumed?

The commentaries offer diametrically different explanations. According to Rashi, the fire represents the appearance of God, while the low and thorny bush represents the Egyptian enemy. God's presence reveals itself even in impure Egypt, in the sense of "I will be with him in trouble" (*Tehilim* 91:15). God is with Israel in their times of trouble.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to the Chizkuni, the fire represents the Egyptian enemy, whereas the low and thorny bush represents the people of Israel enslaved to them. The bush is not consumed by the Egyptian fire, but rather stands strong and survives.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Since there are "seventy faces" to the Torah, we too will offer an explanation.

Later, God will say to Moshe:

And they shall hearken to your voice. And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him: The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. And now let us go, we pray you, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. (*Shemot* 3:18)

This demand will be repeated again and again during the plagues inflicted upon Egypt. We outright reject understanding this demand as a pretext for fleeing from the bondage of Egypt (as we will discuss elsewhere). In our view, the bush that burns but is not consumed parallels what Israel will see in that same place at the time of the revelation at Sinai:

And the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel. (*Shemot* 24:17)

Both Moshe and the people of Israel see fire on Sinai; Israel will see a devouring fire, whereas Moshe sees a fire that does not consume.

What does the fire seen by the people of Israel devour? Perhaps we can find the answer to this question in the revelation that parallels the revelation at Mount Sinai, the revelation that takes place on the day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*:

For today the Lord appears to you. (*Vayikra* 9:4)

And Moshe said: This is the thing which the Lord commanded that you should do; that the glory of the Lord may appear to you. (v. 6)

And Moshe and Aharon went into the tent of meeting, and came out, and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. **And there came forth fire from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fat;** and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (vv. 23-24)

The consuming fire devours the sacrifices brought at the time of God's revelation.

The fire that appeared in the burning bush did not consume anything because there was no sacrifice there. God tells Moshe to bring the people of Israel to that place in order to offer sacrifices there to God, so that the fire that does not consume should turn into a fire that consumes, which is the proper form of revelation. The command to come to the place of the bush and offer there a sacrifice to God by fire – that is to say, for the sake of the fire that consumes the sacrifice in His name – sounds urgent, and is even accompanied by a threat. The name of God that is revealed at the burning bush is *Ehyeh*, and its fire, as stated, does not consume. But God will in the future reveal Himself by way of the Tetragrammaton, which expresses the transition of His presence from the future to the continuous present. This transition will turn the fire that does not consume into a consuming fire. Without an appropriate sacrifice, who know what the fire will consume, God forbid!

All this finds is expressed in the words of Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh:

And they said: “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Let us go, we pray you, three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God; **lest He fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword.**”(*Shemot* 5:3)

The commentators disagree about the meaning of the words, "lest He fall upon us." The Chizkuni explains them in their plain sense – that we fear that if we do not come to sacrifice before God, He will smite us with pestilence or the sword, and Pharaoh will lose his slaves. The Ramban also follows this path. In contrast, Rashi explains that this is a respectful reference to Pharaoh, its precise meaning being: "Lest He fall upon you with pestilence or the sword," if Pharaoh fails to send out the people of Israel.

We will follow here in the footsteps of the Chizkuni and the Ramban. For this purpose, let us examine the plague that occurred in the days of David, in the wake of the census taken of the people:

Or else three days the sword of the Lord, even pestilence in the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the borders of Israel… (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 21:12)

And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem… (v. 16)

And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings, and called upon the Lord; and He answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt-offering. And the Lord commanded the angel; and he put up his sword back into the sheath thereof. (vv. 26-27)

In this plague, injury was inflicted upon the people by way of the pestilence and the sword – the sword of God by way of the destroying angel. The healing began when David built an altar before God to sacrifice upon it burnt-offerings and peace-offerings.

Let us offer a brief clarification of what happened in this plague, even though this is not the forum in which to enter into a full discussion of the sin that was committed in the days of David.[[3]](#footnote-3) *Chazal* maintain that the main sin was that in the days of David, the people did not demand the building of the Temple.[[4]](#footnote-4) We understand this to mean that they did not demand an encounter with God, even though the time for such an encounter had already arrived. For this they were punished with a plague. The sacrifices, which express the encounter with God, come to atone for this sin and to stop the plague. Similarly, Moshe's words to Pharaoh are intended to discuss the demand made by "the God of the Hebrews" to meet His people and the punishment that threatens Israel if they do not come to that encounter with their offerings.

If so, Moshe fears mass injury by way of the sword and pestilence, similar to what would happen in the future in the days of David. This concern is included in his words to Pharaoh. This plague will stem from the fact that God appeared in the bush in fire that in the future would consume, and they will not be able to offer Him sacrifices at the place of the revelation. When the fire begins to consume, it is important that there be sacrifices there, and not, God forbid, the souls of the people of Israel.

1. In v. 12, however, Rashi sees the bush as representing Moshe, who, despite his closeness to the *Shekhina* and his fulfilling God's mission, will not be injured, just as the bush is not consumed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Both the explanation of Rashi and that of Chizkuni are found in *Shemot Rabba* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We will expand upon this matter in our comments on *Parashat Ki-Tisa.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Midrash Tehilim*, psalm 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)