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

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #11:**

**The Burning Bush (1):**

**Attuned to Israel’s Anguish**

At some point after Moses joins Re’uel’s household, the current Pharaoh dies. His evil decree against Israel’s male infants vanishes with his death – we never hear of it again. Yet, Israel still writhes in the throes of enslavement; the people’s groans and anguished cries ascend heavenward, colliding with God.[[1]](#footnote-1) Four expressions of Israel’s agony (their groans, cries, shouts, and moans) shake God out of His hidden silence,[[2]](#footnote-2) awakening four successive divine reactions: He heard, remembered, saw, and knew. This brief passage (2:23-25) trails off with the words, “and God knew,” an enigmatic ending that suggests God’s intimate – and empathetic – awareness of Israel’s situation.[[3]](#footnote-3) God has actively entered the story and divine redemption hovers tantalizingly, but it is not immediately forthcoming.

**Moses the Shepherd**

And Moses was shepherding the sheep of Yitro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the sheep into the desert. And he came to the mountain of God, to Horeb. (*Shemot* 3:1)

Here, the story returns its attention to Moses, hinting that divine salvation will come about through this man, the deliverer of the oppressed from the previous chapter. But our erstwhile rescuer has cut himself off from his nation. Moses now spends his days as a veritable recluse, shepherding Yitro’s sheep in the desert.

Exegetes argue as to what it is that Moses seeks in the desolate desert terrain. Perhaps he simply shuns contact with human civilization, which has proven to be a source of abiding disappointment. Rashi posits that Moses is assiduously avoiding the possibility of any impropriety, pasturing Yitro’s flocks in an area that clearly belongs to no other shepherd.[[4]](#footnote-4) Seforno notes that Moses winds up at the mountain of God, raising the possibility that Moses is searching for God, or at the least for the isolation that facilitates quiet spiritual growth. Rashi and Seforno seem to argue about Moses’ core goals, perhaps weighing in on the reason God selects Moses to lead the nation. Seforno suggests that Moses is on a spiritual quest, which leads him to the upcoming theophany at the bush, while Rashi casts a spotlight on the man of justice who we encountered in the previous chapter, intimating that it is Moses’ moral behavior that draws God’s attention.

In any case, Moses’ occupation is not tangential to the story: his shepherding both directs Moses to leadership and guides him to God. Tending flocks enables a shepherd to acquire skills such as nurturing and empathy, which are necessary for an effective leader. The Bible often refers to its leaders figuratively as “shepherds.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It is not a coincidence that both Moses and David – the two most celebrated leaders of the Bible – function as shepherds prior to their leadership roles. As we learn from David’s story, the ideal shepherd cares for the individual members of his flock, ensuring that each one is safe:[[6]](#footnote-6)

And David said to Saul, “Your servant was a shepherd for his father, with the sheep, and if a lion or bear would come and take one sheep from the flock, I would go out after him and strike him and save [the sheep] from his mouth!” (I Sam. 17:34-35)

A *midrash* sketches a similar portrait of Moses, maintaining that Moses found his way to the burning bush because he was following a stray sheep:

When Moses shepherded the sheep of Yitro in the desert, a lamb ran away from him, and he chased after it until he arrived at a shelter. There, a pool of water formed, and the lamb stopped for a drink. When Moses caught up with him, he said, “I did not know that you were running because you were thirsty!” [Moses] put him on his shoulders and began to walk. God said, “You [Moses] have displayed compassion in leading the sheep that belong to humans; I swear that you shall shepherd My flock, Israel!” (*Shemot Rabba* 2:2)

God, who protects and nurtures His people, is also frequently designated a shepherd.[[7]](#footnote-7) In its praise of God’s salvations, *Tehillim* 77:21 blurs the line between God’s role as shepherd and that of Moses: “You led Your nation like sheep, in the hands of Moses and Aaron.”

Shepherding can lead one closer to God, who is the ultimate example of a caring shepherd: by imitating God, one can know Him.[[8]](#footnote-8) Shepherding is also a solitary occupation; the shepherd has ample time to contemplate nature and meditate on existential matters. It is no wonder that Moses’ shepherding draws him ineluctably to the “mountain of God,” where he encounters a theophany.

**The Bush That Burns but Is Not Consumed**

An angel appears to Moses in verse 2, enveloped in a blazing fire, which is nestled in a bush. Verses 2-4 repeatedly spotlight this pivotal bush, which always appears with the definite article: ***ha****-seneh*, **the** bush. Displaying careful artistry, verse 2 places the word in a different position in each of its three sentences. The bush appears at the end of the first sentence and in the middle of the second, and launches the third sentence:

1. And the angel of God appeared to him in a blazing fire from within **the bush** (*ha-seneh*).
2. And he saw, and behold, **the bush** (*ha-seneh*) is burning with fire.
3. **And the bush** (*ve-haseneh*) is not consumed.

This deft literary flourish appears to portray Moses gradually drawing closer and closer to the featured bush. Moses’ curiosity and perceptiveness prompt him to stray from the path and seek out the bush that burns but is not consumed. And then, because “God saw that he turned aside to see,” God calls out to Moses.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Symbolism swirls around this fiery shrub. Moses’ query (“Why is the bush not consumed?”) trails off without an answer, leaving it to later interpreters to attempt to figure out the meaning of this peculiar sight. Indeed, the burning bush has produced a profusion of commentary. I will divide these commentaries into two broad categories. One approach sees the bush’s symbolism as a part of the call narrative, which commissions Moses for leadership. In this vein, *midrashim* explain that the burning bush contains a message for Moses; its symbolism is designed to indicate the urgent reason for his mission and propel him toward leadership. A second approach prefers to focus on this as the first-time encounter between Moses and God. Moses’ spiritual journey begins here; the exceptional outcome of that process (see, e.g., *Devarim* 34:10, where Moses is said to be the most successful prophet Israel will ever have, in terms of his communication with God) obliges the reader to delve into the manner of its beginnings. Undoubtedly, this story should be read on both levels, and we will examine the merits of both approaches.

**The Burning Bush: A Message to Commission Moses**

What message is Moses meant to internalize from witnessing a bush that burns but is not consumed? The burning bush offers Moses a metaphoric glimpse of the entangled, suffering nation. God introduces a spectacle meant to produce empathy, compassion, and a sense of urgency for Moses, who will soon be charged with the task of liberating Israel from slavery.

Many *midrashim* regard the bush itself as a symbol of Israel’s enslavement and suffering in Egypt. The low shrub represents Israel’s inferior status, while its dense growth suggests Israel’s entrapment in a tangled morass, from which it is difficult to emerge.[[10]](#footnote-10) One *midrash* suggests that the bush is spiky, composed of thorns that grow inward. Someone who thrusts his hand into the bush will not be harmed; it is only in the bid to remove his hand that he runs into difficulties.This illustrates the way Egypt ensnared Israel; entering Egypt was not a problem, but the Egyptians prevent Israel from exiting.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The text does not explicitly describe the bush as thorny;[[12]](#footnote-12) rather, it is the fire that emerges as the evident peril – an apt symbol of Egypt’s torments, which threaten to obliterate the nascent nation. Yet, “the bush is not consumed.” In this vision, God offers Moses a promise designed to combat his fears for the future. In spite of the prevailing adversity, Egypt will not succeed in obliterating the hardy nation:[[13]](#footnote-13)

Why did God show Moses this thing? Because [Moses] was contemplating in his heart and saying: “Perhaps the Egyptians will annihilate Israel.” Therefore, God showed him a blazing fire that did not consume. He said to him, “Just as the bush blazes with fire but is not consumed, so the Egyptians cannot destroy Israel.” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 2:5)

Later biblical passages metaphorically refer to the Egypt of Israel’s enslavement as an “iron furnace” (*Devarim* 4:20; I *Melakhim* 8:51; *Yirmiyahu* 11:4). This symbol suggests that the fires of Egypt will actually strengthen and purify the nation, like iron in a furnace.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Possibly, the sight of the burning bush contains a personal message of encouragement to Moses so that he will not fear for his own safety on his upcoming perilous mission. This is suggested by Rashi, who appears to draw a parallel between the bush and Moses, both of whom function as God’s messengers. In Rashi’s view, by showing Moses this vision, God reassures Moses: “Just as you saw that the bush discharges My assignment and is not consumed, so too, you will go on My assignment, and you will not be harmed.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

**The Burning Bush: A Theophany**

There is no textual indication that the burning bush contains a message to Moses regarding the nation of Israel. In its simplest sense, the burning bush is simply a theophany, a means for conveying God’s revelation. The encounter opens with God calling Moses’ name twice (“Moses Moses!”) and Moses promptly answering: “Here I am.” This launches an I-Thou relationship between God and Moses, a dialogue set in motion by God’s appearance in this bush.

Moses emerged on the scene as a zealous and moral person, committed to fostering justice among people. His persona begins to develop differently here once he encounters God. From this point forward, Moses’ moral sensitivity merges and intermingles with his spiritual persona; he will become a man committed not just to men but also to God. This lengthy conversation opens new possibilities, producing ongoing communication that will affect Moses’ leadership and personality, and even his outward appearance, which will eventually reflect the sublime radiance of his contact with the divine (*Shemot* 34:28-35).

God introduces Himself to Moses in a bush that is on fire. Fire is a common means of representing God’s presence or revelation in the Bible.[[16]](#footnote-16) Its mysterious qualities, the way it flickers, blazes, and ascends upward, even while remaining on earth, and the peculiar way it maintains a concrete material quality along with an amorphous intangible one – all this conveys something of the way humans experience the divine. Indeed, it seems impossible to adequately express God’s immanence; the purity and ferocity of fire remains our most apt representation. Fire is also useful to express the complex way that humans approach the divine presence. One wishes to draw near to fire, to bask in its warmth and light, yet one must naturally shirk from coming too close. Someone who does approach fire should take the necessary precautions, wearing protective gear and carefully avoiding the possibility that it could incinerate those who incautiously venture too close. This is why entrance to the *Mikdash* comes with many precepts; as one comes closer to God’s presence, increasing precautions are necessary. A *midrash* explains that Moses must ascend Mount Sinai wrapped in a cloud, which protects him (like a firefighter’s gear) as he enters the fire of God at the peak of the mountain.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Why does God choose to manifest his theophany in a bush? A biblical passage (Devarim 33:16) will later refer to God as the one who dwells in the bush (*shokheni* *seneh*), focusing on the significance of God’s decision to appear in the bush. One approach suggests that the bush indicates God’s omnipresence – there is no place that does not contain God, even a lowly bush.[[18]](#footnote-18) Another midrash explains that God chooses a lowly bush rather than a more majestic medium to indicate God’s humility:

R. Elazar son of Arakh said: Why did God reveal himself from the highest heavens and speak with Moses from within the bush? Should He not have spoken from the tops of mountains and the loftiest [places] of the world, the cedars of Lebanon? Rather, He humbled himself and spoke from within the bush. (*Mekhilta Shemot* 3:2)

God’s humility is not merely one of God’s positive attributes, this trait actually lays the groundwork for the bold proposition – arguably at the heart of the Bible’s goals – that an ongoing relationship between God and humans can exist. It can exist only because God chooses to humble Himself to make room for a genuine conversation with humans.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**God’s Theophany and Moses’ Mission**

Another *midrash* blends the two approaches toward the bush’s symbolism cited above – the moral message (indicating to him the necessity of removing Israel from their suffering) and the spiritual one (indicating to him God’s presence in the fiery bush) – explaining that setting a fiery theophany inside a thorny bush illustrates God’s empathy with Israel’s suffering.[[20]](#footnote-20) The bold anthropomorphic nature of this *midrash* indicates the lengths to which it is willing to go to portray God’s identification with Israel’s suffering:

R. Yannai said: Just like twins, where if one feels [a pain] in his head, his counterpart feels it as well… God said to Moses, “Are you aware that I am mired in anguish just as Israel is mired in anguish? Now you will know this from the place from which I speak with you – from amidst the thorns, [to show] that it is as if I share in their [physical] anguish!” (*Shemot Rabba* 2:5)

This *midrash* depicts God and Israel as an intwined pair, in which God viscerally endures Israel’s pain. Of all the ideas proposed by the *midrashim*, it is this one that Rashi references to explain God’s appearance in the bush:[[21]](#footnote-21)

“From the bush” – and not in a different plant, because [*Tehillim* 91:15]: “I am with him in distress.” (Rashi *Shemot* 3:4)

In Rashi’s view, the theophany in a burning bush portrays God’s compassion, His deep connection to Israel. God’s empathy for His nation accompanies His decision to liberate Israel from its suffering. This is a warmhearted, consoling portrait, depicting a compassionate and passionate God, poised to liberate His beloved nation.

1. *Shemot* 2:23 (in contrast to *Bamidbar* 20:16 and *Devarim* 26:7) does not explicitly depict Israel directing its cries to God, although their cries are certainly heard by God. Years of suffering amidst a sense of abandonment may have fostered a deep sense of alienation, resulting in the inability to turn to God in prayer (in contrast to Ibn Ezra on *Shemot* 2:23 and Nachmanides on *Shemot* 12:42, both of whom assume that Israel does turn to God in our verse). According to a straightforward reading of the text, Israel first turns directly to God after Pharaoh chases Israel and entraps them at the Reed Sea (*Shemot* 14:10). Some *midrashim* (e.g. *Shir Ha-shirim* *Rabba* 2:2) suggest that God contrives the event at the sea in order to force Israel to pray. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nachmanides (*Shemot* 2:25) explains that until now, God had hidden His face from Israel, but from this point, He will no longer do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Based on these verses, *midrashim* observe that God’s promise of redemption does not necessarily depend upon Israel’s worthiness, but rather on God’s compassion. See, e.g., *Tanchuma Shemot* 20; *Shemot Rabba* 3:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A *midrash* compares our two great shepherds, Moses and David, who share this concern (*Shemot Rabba* 2:3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, *Bamidbar* 27:17; I *Melakhim* 22:17; *Yirmiyahu* 23:1-4; *Yechezkel* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Midrashim* expand upon the individual care that David extends to his sheep, offering several examples and concluding with God proclaiming: “He who knows how to shepherd each sheep according to his strength should come and shepherd my nation!” (*Shemot Rabba* 2:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.g., *Bereishit* 48:15; *Yirmiyahu* 23:3; Ezekiel 34; *Tehillim* 23:1; 80:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In *Shir Ha-shirim* 1:7, an enthusiastic Re’aya (the female figure of the book) asks her beloved Dod (the male figure of the book, who here appears to be a shepherd) to show her the way to the place where he is pasturing and resting with his flocks. He responds: “*If you do not know*, most beautiful of women, go out for yourself to the flocks of sheep, and shepherd your lambs along with the other shepherds.” One has to be a shepherd to know and find another shepherd. This is an especially significant passage if we consider that the common midrashic understanding is that the relationship between the Dod and the Re’aya is a figurative representation of the relationship between God and His nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A *midrash* (*Shemot Rabba* 2:6) connects this sentence (“And God saw that he turned aside to see”) to Moses’ previous acts of justice, where he had “seen” the suffering of his brethren. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Shemot Rabba* 2:5 cites R’ Eliezer’s view that the lowly shrub depicts Israel’s low status in Egypt, and also R’ Yosi’s view that the bristly bush represents the difficulty of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shemot* *Rabba* 2:5. This *midrash* (cited also in the previous footnote) offers a lengthy discourse on the possible symbolic meanings of the burning bush. Many different midrashic ideas cited in this *shiur* appear in this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. It is unclear whether the *seneh* is a generic term for a bush or refers to a particular species. Early Aramaic texts suggest that it is a spiny plant. See BDB, p. 702. See also Propp, *Exodus*, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This promise has reverberated and given hope throughout the difficult chapters of Israel’s history, filled as it has been with persecution. A cursory internet search revealed three Hebrew books bearing the title, “And the Bush Was Not Consumed” – two about the Holocaust and one about Theodore Herzl’s Zionist dream. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See *Yechezkel* 22:17-22, where the prophet uses an image of an iron furnace that purifies a sinful nation, which contains an excess of dross. In *Yechezkel*, the context is punitive, while with regard to Egypt, the iron furnace may be designed to be a formative, strengthening experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rashi on *Shemot* 3:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, e.g., *Bereishit* 15:17; *Shemot* 19:18; 24:17. See also Jeremiah’s description of his prophetic message as a burning fire that he could not keep inside (*Yirmiyahu* 20:9). This verse has certain linguistic connections to the description of the burning bush. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Zohar* II (*Shemot*) *Vayakhel*, 197a. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See R. Yehoshua ben Karcha’s discussion with a gentile in *Shemot Rabba* 2:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Greenberg, *Exodus*, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For another variation of this idea, see *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Rashi’s choice seems aligned with his general tendency to use his commentary to console Israel during the difficult period of the Crusades and reassure them that God remains with them during adversity. R’ Mordechai Breuer (*Megadim* 28 (5758), pp. 45-72) observes that Rashi introduces his commentary to each of the five books of the Torah by praising Israel and showing God’s love for His nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)