

## ***Burning Bush***

*Moses said, 'I must turn aside to look at this marvellous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses, Moses.'* (Exodus 3:3-4)

Moses' encounter at the burning bush is a moment of revelation. But it doesn't happen all at once. At first Moses is fascinated by what appears to be a natural phenomenon. Drawn to it, he comes to realize that God is addressing him.

In the vast corpus of Jewish biblical commentary, discussions emerge around the burning bush which are imaginative and insightful. For example, Bahya ben Asher, a 14th century scholar, sees this passage in terms of spiritual growth:

The narrative underlines that Moses achieved the perception of three things: the fire, the angel and the Shechinah [the divine presence]... Since this was Moses' first experience of prophecy the Almighty wished to initiate him gradually... To what may this be compared? To a man who has been confined to a dark room...If he suddenly goes out into the sun he will be blinded. He must therefore get gradually used to the light. The same thing applies to spiritual light.<sup>1</sup>

Bahya's comment is thought-provoking when one considers that at the end of his life, Moses will be described as the prophet *par excellence* 'whom the Lord singled out, face to face' (Deut. 34:10). We are reminded that a life of profound spirituality has to start somewhere, with small steps, and for Moses that special intimacy with the Lord begins here, not on a grand mountain top but at a prickly thorn bush.

Probing the text further, the Jewish sages ask: but is the burning bush more than a 'shock tactic' used by God to attract Moses' attention? Could it be part of the divine message? In their creative storytelling (Midrash) we find this answer: that God, out of concern for the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, deliberately chose the burning bush saying:

'Just as the thorn-bush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel.'<sup>2</sup>

But not all the sages accept this view. Why not? Read the text: "*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire*" (3:2). To suggest that the fire symbolizes the oppressor of the Israelites contradicts this verse which associates the fire with a messenger of God.

So, what alternative views does the midrash offer? Let me leave you (below) with four.<sup>3</sup> As you read, savour the creativity and variety of Jewish interpretations.

Rabbi Joshua ben Karhah: 'Why a thornbush and not a carob or sycamore tree? To teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thornbush.'

Rabbi Eliezer: 'Just as the thornbush is the lowliest of all trees, so Israel was lowly and humble in Egypt; therefore did God reveal Himself to them and redeem them.'

Said the Holy One: 'Don't you feel that I suffer anguish whenever Israel does? Know from the character of the place from which I am speaking, out of the thornbush, that I share their suffering.'

'Just as it is the nature of a thornbush, that if a man thrusts his hand into it, the hand suffers no hurt because its thorns are bent downwards, but when he tries to pull his hand out, the thorns catch it...so it is with Egypt. At the beginning they welcomed Israel... But when they sought to leave, they would not let them.'

1. Quoted in Leibowitz, 52-53. 2. Exodus Rabbah 2:6 3. #1-4: Exodus Rabbah; #5: Yalkut Shimoni

Sources. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture: NJPS.

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