

# AND THIS WILL BE, FOR YOU, A SIGN...: THE UNCONSUMED BUSH AND MA'AMAD HAR SINAI

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

The first time that Mosheh encountered "the mountain of God", he was shepherding Yitro's flock and was amazed by the astounding sight of an enflamed bush that would not be devoured. When he turned to see this awesome apparition, Hashem spoke to him and inaugurated him into prophecy - and, as is well-known, Mosheh refused, refusal upon refusal, to accept the mission. "They will not believe", "Who am I?", "They will ask me for Your name" and so on and so forth. At the end of this pivotal scene, Hashem "meets Mosheh halfway" and allows him to take Aharon as a spokesman. At Mosheh's first hesitation - "who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt", Hashem answers (3:12): "I will be with you, and this is the sign that I have sent you; when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." This inscrutable answer has been subject to numerous interpretations - what is the sign? What is the connection between the first part of the verse and the second? How does any of this answer Mosheh's challenge? As Ramban testifies "there are many interpretations of this verse" - before he bypasses Rashi and ibn Ezra and presents his own approach.

I would like to suggest another way of looking at the "sign", one informed by the experience of Ma'amad Har Sinai in these two Parashot (Yitro/Mishpatim). Keep in mind that the narrative at Sinai is presented over chapters 19-24 and, according to most Mefarshim (contra Ramban), the Korban, B'rit and Mosheh entering the cloud at the end of Parashat Mishpatim happened within the same narrative context.

There are those who suggest that the "sign" that Hashem showed Mosheh was the bush itself - it was burning, yet not spent nor devoured. Whether we view this as miraculous, indicating that Hashem is with Mosheh (as ibn Ezra suggests) or a more complex "sign" - that just as the bush, B'nei Yisra'el are being miraculously sustained while in Egypt - this is an explanation that seems to fit most closely with the words of the verse.

As attractive as this approach may be, it doesn't answer the key questions raised above - how does this explain the second half of the verse - how is it related to the future worship of Hashem at this mountain?

## II

There are two words for "miracle" which often appear in proximity of each other in T'nakh - "Ot" and

"Mofet". Yet, these words have very different meanings - a "Mofet" is, literally, a "wonder" - something so amazing and supernatural as to excite the imagination, impress the audience and convince the onlookers that the person performing the "Mofet" is, indeed, an agent of the Almighty. An "Ot", on the other hand, means "sign" and should be understood to be instructive and symbolic; although often wondrous in nature, an "ot" is more spectacular for what it indicates than how much it impresses. A clear example of this is the three "Otot" which Shmuel gave to Shaul upon his first coronation (Shmuel I 10:1-7) - each was an indicator of his rapid ascent to the position of leadership in Israel. Note that in our verse, Hashem describes the undefined "Zeh" as an "Ot".

Note further that the "Ot" here is not intended for others; Hashem explicitly tells Mosheh that "Zeh yih'yeh l'kha l'ot" - "this will be - for you (implication - for you alone) a sign". So - we need to look ahead to Mosheh's personal experiences to divine what the "Zeh" may refer to.

At the end of this week's Parashah, we read the following about Mosheh's ascent to Har Sinai: "And the appearance of the glory of Hashem was like a devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the B'nei Yisra'el. And Mosheh entered into the midst of the cloud, and went up into the mount; and Mosheh was in the mount forty days and forty nights." (24:17-18)

In other words - when Mosheh led the people out of Egypt back to the spot of the great "sign" - the burning bush - he himself became the bush, amidst an all-consuming fire yet not consumed - and B'nei Yisra'el looked on from a distance, much as he had done on this same mountain, months before, as he was inaugurated into prophecy. The sign on the mountain was a "sign for him" - in answer to his question "who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh...", Hashem showed him that he would eventually have the same miraculous protection around him as this lowly bush, able to step into the all-consuming fire of Hashem's presence and remain unscathed.

"And this (the burning, unconsumed bush) will be - for you (and you alone) a sign - (which will be realized) when you bring the people out of Egypt and you worship God on this mountain."

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