

THE BURNING BUSH: DEFINING THE JEWISH CORE

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The Burning Bush: Defining the Jewish Core¹

The image of the burning bush vividly imprints itself upon us as a symbol of Moshe's mission. Encountering it launches his career. Clearly, its symbolism expresses something powerful about the job and Moshe's relationship to it.

On one level, we understand that the simplicity and inelegance of a wild bush in the wilderness speaks of a Jewish people without merit and without accomplishment. It warns Moshe of the urgency of responding to the brilliant fire of Hashem's presence, still very much attached to the bush, but on the cusp of slipping away, if His people move from the 49th to the dreaded 50th level of degradation.

This approach, however, begs the question. Why did G-d wait for the last moment, only then to move speedily? The hurriedness of the redemption is a repeated theme of the Exodus. The abysmal level to which the Jews had sunk necessitated the hurriedness. But HKBH could have moved to redeem them somewhat earlier, and the pace of redemption could have slowed! Why did He wait?

Possibly, Hashem wished to allude to the familiar analogy of the "kernel of vitality." A seed sprouts only when most of its case has decayed and decomposed, leaving behind the bare germ from which new life continues. Precisely when that germ is situated between the poles of death and new life, precisely then the new cycle begins. The burning bush symbolizes a Jewish people stripped of everything, retaining only some invisible permanent essence. Moshe sees the bush, and reacts in amazement. Can the Jewish people endure the lowest levels, and still survive? Hashem shows him the paradox of Jewish survival - that we begin anew after severe spiritual setbacks. Moreover, the process of rebirth not only can take place after reaching some nadir, it is exactly from that point that new growth is expected. The Exodus had to be hurried because we could not survive long on the 49th level; it could not have occurred any earlier, however, because the optimum time for renewal comes when only the bare essence is left, and all else has fallen away.

It is not difficult to elaborate upon this kernel of vitality, to establish its identity. Chazal tell us that we were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of *emunah*. Belief in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* remains in place when we would have expected it to wither and die. It can remain in force despite being surrounded by the worst *tumah*. Moshe asked, "What if they do not believe me?" He contemplated their state, and could not understand how a vital kernel of belief remained in such inhospitable conditions. He

could not detect a core belief strong enough to spawn a spiritual rebirth. At the burning bush, however, Hashem thundered instructions to him, "Remove your shoes from your feet! The place you stand upon is holy!" The holiness He called to Moshe's attention was that of the Jewish people. It was alive and well, despite their spiritual downturn. (As R. Noach of Lechovitch taught, a Jew who begins to question his *emunah* should have faith that he has faith! When he fails to feel the strength of that faith within, he should assure himself that the faith is there, but remains hidden and obscured. The faith is planted firmly in his soul by virtue of his relationship with the *avos* who vouchsafed it to him.)

We can suggest another form of the vital kernel - a Jew's refusal to accept his spiritual condition. Growth comes when the soul screams out against its circumstances, unwilling to accept a life that is not a life, determined not to give in to its apparent reality but to struggle to fight it off. Think of people gathered around a well into which someone fell. So long as they hear plaintive cries from the bottom, they know that the unfortunate victim is still alive and wishes to emerge. Should they hear nothing, they fear that the impact caused the victim to lose consciousness - or worse. A soul that still recognizes the Divine is pained by what it longs for, and demands to be raised up. This obstinacy is itself a form of the vital kernel, and the source of much growth.

Hashem tells Moshe, "*Re'oh ra-isi*, I have surely seen the affliction of my people."² A medrash³ picks up on the doubling of the verb, *re'oh ra-isi*. "You, Moshe, see only one seeing; I, however, see two seeings." Man can only observe the external; G-d sees the external but sees the innermost recesses as well. Despite their sinking to the 49th level of depravity, Hashem can still detect their hearts crying out against that very position. This is one way of looking at Hashem's command to Moshe to remove his shoes in deference to the sanctity of the place. Moshe is told to remove the externalities that mask the qualities of the inner person; when he does, he will discover that the innermost part of the Jewish soul remains *terra sancta*, holy turf.

The *seforim ha-kedoshim* emphasize that not only were the Jews enslaved and imprisoned in Egypt, but their very speech was held captive as well. They did not have words with which to address Hashem. They could muster nothing more than anguished groans, which he recognized to come from the spiritual pain of refusing to accept their debased state. This was the beginning of their rebirth.

The burning bush might be approached from a very different direction, yielding different lessons important to Moshe at his initiation as a leader. The fire may symbolize the *tumah* of Egypt - a *tumah* which is itself symbolic of the worst spiritual degradation known at the time. One would expect the bush to be no match for the consumptive powers of the raging flame, but the bush stubbornly holds out. Where one would predict that any Jewish holiness would have been lost to the Egyptian *tumah* that *Bnei Yisrael* took part in, their *kedushah* did not vanish. Moshe is amazed by the incongruity. Hashem instructs him to take off his shoes in deference to a *kedushah* that he, Moshe, was unaware of. The ground beneath him was holy, representing the inherent *kedushah* of Jewishness,

misunderstood and underappreciated.

Many have said that it is impossible to convey to a non-Jew what it means to be Jewish. Rav Baruch of Mezhibozh corrected this. It is impossible, he warned, to convey even to a Jew what it means to be Jewish! Were a Jew to understand the power of that *kedushah*, it would be impossible for him ever to sin. When he does sin, he remains, despite his shortcoming, strongly attached to the G-d Who loves him.

Chazal tell us that at no time did the world demonstrate its purpose and worth more than the day *Shir HaShirim* was given. To be sure, there were more momentous moments in human history, accompanied by great miracles and wonders: the Exodus, the splitting of the Sea, the giving of the Torah at Sinai. *Shir HaShirim*, however, articulates a message that is not explicit in the other events: the great love Hashem has for His people, and the love they have for Him.

The Baal Shem Tov's contribution was meant to hasten the coming of *Mashiach*, and to bring the world to a state of *tikun*. In such a state, the reciprocal love between Hashem and Israel is brought to full flower. The way to that great day is also through love, which hastens the redemption and contributes to the final *tikun*.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs.31-35

² Shemos 3:7

³ Shemos Rabbah 3:2