

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE THORN BUSH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

The Symbolism of the Thorn Bush

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #884 - The Corrosive Effect of Non-Kosher Foods. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Shemos can be considered a historic parsha. A seminal event in Jewish history occurred in this week's parsha that has effects until today: This is the parsha in which the Almighty chooses Moshe to lead the Jewish people and it is the first parsha in which the Almighty speaks to the Jewish people through Moshe Rabbeinu.

We are all familiar with the famous incident that inaugurates Moshe's status as a prophet: "An angel of G-d appeared to him in a flame of fire from within a thorn bush. He saw and behold! The bush was burning in the fire but the bush was not consumed." [Shemos 3:2] G-d appeared to Moshe in the guise of a burning bush. We often judge based on first impressions. This is G-d's introduction to the Jewish people. Of all possible symbolisms in which to introduce Himself, the Almighty chooses the symbolism of a burning bush. Why not a fir tree? Why not a mighty oak? Why not a cedar tree?

Rashi explains: As a bush -- and not as any other tree -- to indicate, "I am with them in their time of trouble" (Imo Anochi b'Tzarah). The Almighty is making a statement here. He appears as a lowly bush to emphasize that He is with us in our travails. G-d's appearing as a bush on fire was a metaphor that the Jewish people could identify with in their times of tribulation in Egypt. This idea of "Imo Anochi b'Tzarah" is very much akin to another expression often used to indicate sharing the burden with a fellow Jew: "nosei b'ol im chaveiro" (literally - carrying the yoke with his friend).

But even more pronounced is Moshe's reaction: Moshe thought, "Let me turn aside now and see this great sight - why will the bush not be burned?" [Shemos 3:3]. The pasuk says that G-d saw that Moshe's intent was to check out the phenomenon and immediately thereafter it says that G-d called to Moshe from the midst of the bush and Moshe responded, "Here I am!"

Let us pose the following question: Who would not be interested in checking out a bush that was burning without being consumed? People stop to check up on what is happening even if they witness nothing stranger than a house on fire. The fire is consuming the house, but it still draws a crowd of people who are "checking it out". No normal person in his right mind would ignore a miraculous phenomenon such as a flaming bush which is NOT being consumed.

The way the pasukim are presented, they seem to indicate that somehow the very fact that Moshe came closer to check out the phenomenon of the burning bush was what prompted G-d to decide, as it were, "Aha! He's my man!" This is very curious, because anyone would do this.

The Medrash asks this question and answers that the Almighty was not impressed that Moshe checked out the bush. According to the Medrash "And G-d saw that he turned aside to see..." [Shemos 3:4] is not referring to the burning bush at all. It refers rather to Moshe's turning aside to see (when he was still in Egypt) the affliction of the Jewish people. Moshe was in the lap of luxury, a prince in the house of Pharaoh and nevertheless he went out to check up on the welfare of his brethren and he saw their suffering (Va'yare b'sivlosam) [Shemos 2:11]. This is the event referred to by "And Hashem saw that he (Moshe) turned aside to see" ("Va'yare Hashem ki sar lir'os").

This is actually an attribute of the Almighty - He descends from His Mighty Abode to check up on the needs and welfare of His nation. This is the metaphor of the Divine Fire in the lowly bush. My "Shalom Aleichem" (personal introduction) to the Jewish people, the Almighty states, is the message that I descend to be amongst them in their time of need. I will pick a leader for them who also carries this same attribute of "Imo anochi b'tzarah" - when you are in pain I am in pain as well!

There is a marvelous comment of the Baal HaTurim in Parshas Miketz on the pasuk "And to Yosef were born two sons before the years of famine came." [Bereishis 41:50]. The Talmud teaches the significance of the fact that Yosef's children were born before the years of famine and derives from here the Halacha that a person is forbidden to engage in marital relations with his wife during a time of famine [Taanis 11a]. The principle is that when people are suffering one should abstain from acts of pleasure. Even though abstaining from pleasurable activities will not in and of itself relieve the suffering of others it demonstrates that one wishes to associate with those who suffer: "Imo anochi b'tzarah" [I am with him together in his time of travail]. Yosef thus, like Moshe, was also one who suffered together with his fellow man.

Listen now to the comment of the Baal HaTurim: Only twice in the Torah do we find the word "u'l'Yosef" [and to Yosef] - one is the above quoted pasuk in Parshas Miketz and the other is in Zos Habracha "And to Yosef it was said: Blessed by Hashem is his land..." [Devorim 33:13]. The Baal HaTurim expounds this homiletically as a type of "Gezeirah Shavah" [linguistic linkage from which lessons may be derived]: Since Yosef abstained from personal pleasure because people were suffering, he merited that G-d blessed his land. Indeed the portion of Yosef was the most abundant and fertile region in the entire Land of Israel. Rashi says this explicitly in Chumash on the above-cited

pasuk from Zos HaBracha. This was a "measure for measure" reward. One who is a "Nos'ai b'ol im chaveiro" [bears the burden of his fellow's suffering] is deserving of a bonanza.

Rav Matisyahu Solomon has a beautiful insight along these same lines. In the blessing of Yosef in Zos HaBracha it is written "and with the delicacies of the land and its fullness; and by the goodwill of He who rests in the thorn bush..." [Devarim 33:16]. This is the only place in the Chumash in which the Almighty is referred to by the title "He who rests in the thorn bush"! Rashi there makes the point that Moshe is blessing Yosef with the thought "May his land be blessed out of the goodwill and contentment of the Holy One, Blessed is He, Who was first revealed to me in the thorn bush."

The Almighty's "Shalom Aleichem" to Klal Yisrael was through the thorn bush to demonstrate that He empathized and associated with their troubles. He picked Moshe, who was another individual who empathized with the troubles of the people. Finally, Moshe blessed Yosef who empathized with the troubles of the people and invoked in his blessing "the One who rests in the thorn bush" because Yosef (like Moshe) demonstrated the attribute that the Almighty appreciates": Nos'ai b'ol im chaveiro."

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shemos are provided below:

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