



## Shemos 2023

### Visionary Leadership

3 minute read | Straightforward

The story of Egypt begins by setting the scene of a nation oppressed and enslaved, and we learn a few details of Moshe's youth.

He witnesses an Egyptian officer harassing a Jew and intervenes to save the victim and kill the bully. He witnesses two Jews fighting and intervenes to separate them. He witnesses shepherds bullying Yisro's daughters and intervenes to protect them.

The Midrash fills in some gaps, suggesting that he followed a thirsty lost lamb which led him to the burning bush.

Although the Torah and our Sages give specific indications that Moshe was born special and was always destined to save his people, the Torah also leaves a space for these formative stories, suggesting that it wasn't as simple as destiny; that Moshe also had certain vital qualities and characteristics that made him the man for the job.

The Meshech Chochma notes that the common thread in these short vignettes is that Moshe demonstrates his compassion and concern for the weak and vulnerable and a willingness to take responsibility and intervene for others. He was someone who would risk his well-being to take action that would help another:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּבְיָה – Hashem saw that he had turned to look, and God called to him from within the thorn bush. (3:4)

This is the very first time God speaks to Moshe, the moment Moshe is called to greatness, to become the ultimate leader and liberator. While the simple reading is that God noticed Moshe turn to look at the bizarre apparition of a bush on fire yet did not burn, it also suggests the quality that God recognizes in Moshe, that Moshe is someone who notices things and will turn to look – וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת. Consider that this is one of the vanishingly few instances where the Torah narrates God's thoughts to us, in this case, that God noticed something which provoked a response from God as a result.

Sure, Moshe was born under miraculous circumstances and, by luck, was born straddling the political divide between Egypt and the Jewish People. But while we can't hope to emulate the circumstances of his birth, we can undoubtedly invoke the qualities that made him so compelling and worthy in God's



## TorahRedux

eyes. Moshe was a natural giver and helper who wanted nothing in return. He protected the weak and vulnerable with genuine self-sacrifice – all before God ever said a word to him.

That's the kind of person who can carry people out of the depths of abject misery to the heights of greatness. While the specific expression looks different, they start with one thing – the leader's vision.

Before you can solve, first, you must see.

Our sages teach that when Pharaoh announced his policy for all the Jewish infant boys to be thrown in the Nile, Bilam congratulated him on his wise policy and was rewarded by the king; Yitro told him that it was wrong and had to flee for his life; and Iyov saw that Yisro's protest was ineffective, so chose the path of prudence and was silent in the face of monstrous evil.

And as a result, says the Midrash, he was afflicted with all of the suffering recounted in the book of his name.

Pharaoh took counsel on his policies of genocide, oppression, and subjugation from three men – Bilaam, Yisro, and Iyov; the renowned villain advised Pharaoh to hurt the Jewish People, Yisro advised against it and fled, and Iyov remained silent and suffered for pretty much the rest of his days.

But Pharaoh was resolved on his wickedness! Yisro's protest was ineffective, not to mention the Torah itself says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. What good would it have done to speak up?

R' Chaim Shmulevitz answers that it's basic – when something hurts, you scream. Even if it does not accomplish anything, you scream from the pain.

Iyov wasn't pained enough at the prospect of all Jewish boys drowning in the Nile; pain does not allow you to stay silent. Open your eyes to the people around you. It doesn't hurt enough if you can rationally decide that it's not worth it to scream.

As R' Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook said, I don't speak because I have the power to speak; I speak because I don't have the power to remain silent.

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## **You are Worthy**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The Exodus is an orienting event for the Jewish People, a founding moment in our history, with a daily duty to recall it. It's the first thing God has to say to humans at Sinai; God introduces Himself as the God who took us out of Egypt.



Remembering the Exodus is a perpetual mitzvah, and an astounding amount of our daily blessings, mitzvos, and prayers commemorate the Exodus – זָכַר לִיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם. It is ubiquitous to the extent we could miss the point entirely.

What do we mean when we say that we remember that God took the Jews out of Egypt?

It is essential to understand first principles because they are the foundational concepts that govern the systems built upon them.

If we unpack the story, the Jews in Egypt didn't deserve to be saved because they were so good or so special; in fact, quite the opposite.

The Zohar imagines the angels arguing whether or not God should save the Jews, and the argument was that “this lot are just a bunch of idol-worshippers, and so are those!” The Haggadah admits as much – מִתְחַלְלָה עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה הָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ –

When Moshe told the Jews to set aside and take one sheep per family, the Midrash says that “set aside” meant setting aside their idols before taking the sheep for the mitzvah!

When even Moshe, already well on his way to greatness, saw Yisro's daughters getting bullied and got involved in the dispute to protect them, the onlookers mistook him for just another Egyptian!

The Midrash famously states that the enslaved Jews retained their names, clothing, and language. This is often framed as a point of pride, but the point would seem to be that apart from these narrow and limited practices, they were otherwise indistinguishable from Egyptians in every other conceivable way!

Moreover, the generation that left Egypt and stood at Sinai fought Moshe the rest of their lives, begging to go back to Egypt, and was ultimately doomed to wander and die in the wilderness.

The Zohar goes so far as to say that the Jews were on the 49th level of spiritual malaise, just one notch off rock bottom, the point of no return. Rav Kook notes that this adds a particular dimension to the imagery of God's strong outstretched arm – it was a forceful intervention, an emergency rescue of a nation that had stumbled and was about fall off a cliff – בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע גְּטוּיָה –

As R' Shlomo Farhi explains, whenever God is characterized with strength, it indicates God doing something that is undeserved. God does not require more incremental strength to move a grape than a galaxy; but God can force compassion to overwhelm what justice requires – גּוֹאֵל וְחֹזֵק אֶתָּה –

That is to say that on a fundamental level, the Jews didn't deserve rescuing at all.

And yet crucially, as R' Chaim Kanievsky notes, God responded to their cries all the same – וַנִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' – אֱלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת־קוֹלֵנוּ



The Divrei Chaim notes that the very first Commandment is no command at all; God “introduces” himself as the God who took us out of Egypt – אַנְכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים. It’s not a command – it is just a simple statement of fact. We might not deserve redemption, yet God redeems us all the same.

R’ Tzadok haKohen writes that to remember Egypt is to remember God’s first declarative sentence; our God rescues people from Egypt, whatever they have done and whoever they have become. Our God initiates the great Exodus before the Jewish People ever take a single step of their own to be better – אַנְכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.

The Ropshitzer quipped that תְּחִלָּה לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זָכַר לִיצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם – the first step towards holiness is remembering that the same Exodus that rescued people from the abyss once before could be just a moment away.

So when we remind ourselves about Egypt, it’s not just that it happened once, but that, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe put it, God’s redemption is not contingent on our worthiness.

Take this lesson to heart; it’s one of the vanishingly few that the Torah specifically asks us to remember at all times – לְמַעַן תִּזְכֹּר אֶת־יוֹם צֵאתְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ.

And it’s clear why.

You don’t need to remember the simple historical events of the Exodus; you have to remind yourself that every single last human is worthy of God’s unconditional love.

## **Refusing the Call**

5 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov’s family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to subjugate the Jewish People, which they slowly dialed up until it became intolerable. Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe’s birth and upbringing before he has to flee.

Moshe encounters the mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלְחֹץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לְחַצִּים אֹתָם: וְעַתָּה לָכֶּה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פְּרַעֲהוּ וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פְּרַעֲהוּ וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי: “The cry of the Children – אֲדֹנָי לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מִתְּמוֹל גַּם מִשְׁלָשׁ גַּם מֵאִזְ דְּבָרְךָ אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פָּה וְכְבֹד לְשׁוֹן אֲנִי:



of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt.” But Moshe said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?”... Moshe said to God, “Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is the beginning of one of the most epic and important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering, and his birth and upbringing uniquely situated him to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses; not once, but twice!

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

It's essential to understand that refusing the call is not just a literary trope that humanizes the hero; because this story isn't ordinary literature. If Moshe could refuse the call, and his refusal is part of this timeless story, it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we need to acknowledge and understand.

It wasn't that Moshe doubted that his people could or should be saved; it's that Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities – he didn't think he was worthy of such a great mission. He didn't think he had what it takes, and he was missing what he believed to be a key trait to be successful – he wasn't a man of words! How would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he advocate for his people to the Egyptian government? This isn't faux humility – Moshe is articulating an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the answer seems to be that none of that matters at all, that he has to get on with it just the same.

When the Mishkan was finally ready for inauguration, Ahron refuses the call, feeling ashamed and unworthy, in part because of his complicity in the Golden Calf incident. In the view of our sages, Ahron's shame was exactly what validated him as the right person; his self-awareness of his shortcomings, and his view of the position deserving gravity and severity. Moshe couldn't say Ahron was wrong, and only encourages him to ignore those doubts – שְׁהֵי אַהֲרֹן בּוֹשׁ וַיֵּרָא לְגִשְׁתּוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה, לָמָּה אַתָּה – בּוֹשׁ? לָכֵן נִבְחַרְתָּ.

In the Purim story, Esther also refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life. Mordechai gives her a similar response – she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But that doesn't matter; the call to action stands open, and someone has got to respond. If Esther focuses on her fears and flaws, then she will lose the opportunity to step up, and someone else will – כִּי אִם־הִתְקַרְשׁ תִּתְחַרְשִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רּוּחַ וְהִצְלָה גְּעֻמִיד לַיהוּדִים מִמְּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him and called upon him to be that generation's prophet. Like Moshe, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker, and in what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong; but because they ultimately don't matter – וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:



בְּטָרָם אֶצְרָךְ בְּבֶטֶן יְדֻעֲתֶיךָ וּבְטָרָם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשׁוֹתֶיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְתִּיךָ: וְאָמַר אֲתָה אֲדֹנָי הַהִנֵּה לֹא־יָדַעְתִּי דְבַר כִּי־נִעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי אֶל־תֹּאמַר נִעַר אָנֹכִי כִּי עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ תִּלְוֶה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹּר.

The Torah is deliberate in how it presents stories to us; what it leaves in, and also what it leaves out. Of all the small interactions that don't make the final cut, we should take note that refusing the call is an interaction the Torah deems necessary for us to know about many of our heroes. Our greatest heroes don't just jump at the chance to do what is so obviously the right thing; whether the right thing isn't so obvious in the moment, or whether they didn't eagerly jump for other complex reasons. The Torah's stories consistently contain a refusal of the call; our legends also experienced doubt and uncertainty, just like we do.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems you see around your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? Ironically, anyone deluded and narcissistic enough to think they are perfect enough would be the worst candidate. The Torah seems to be saying that it has got to be you – אֶל־תֹּאמַר נִעַר אָנֹכִי.

If you have adequately honed your sensitivities, you recognize you have a lot of work to do and so many people need your help. You might even hear a call to action in your life vibrating deep within, but it's not enough. You doubt yourself, and you refuse the call. You're scared – and you should be! There is plenty to be scared of, and the stakes couldn't be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לֹא עָלֶיךָ – הַמְּלָאכָה לְגֹמֵר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוּרִין לְבִטֹּל מִמְּנָה.

There is moral fiber in quieting the voice of self-doubt and stepping up to answer the call anyway – אֵם אִין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי.

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn't engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to shirk our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they just don't matter; there's work to do!

Moshe, Ahron, Jeremiah, and Esther all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you're in, you're not qualified for it and that people are going to figure out any minute that you're a poser with no clue what you're doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset, but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you're not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each reason was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt and uncertainty are. The Torah's consistent thematic response to our greats, and through them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there's work to do, and someone has to do it.



So why shouldn't it be you?

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## **Taboo**

5 minute read | Straightforward

The materials procurement process is one of the painstakingly detailed aspects of the Mishkan's planning and development. Aside from the sections about fundraising, the Torah includes a public ledger accounting for all sources and uses, recording where every last donation ended.

While not precisely gripping, there is a discrepancy in how the Torah accounts for how they utilized the donations of bronze:

וְנִחַשְׁתָּ הַתְּנוּפָה שְׂבָעִים כֶּכֶר וְאַלְפִים וְאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל. וַיַּעַשׂ בָּהּ אֶת־אֲדָנֵי פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת מִזְבַּח הַנְּחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת־מִכְבַּר הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ  
The donated bronze came to 70 talents and 2,400 shekels. From it, he made the sockets for the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; the bronze altar and its bronze grating and all the utensils of the altar; the sockets of the enclosure and the sockets of the gate of the enclosure; and all the pegs of the Mishkan and all the pegs of the enclosure. (38:29-31)

The Abarbanel notes that there is a bronze vessel we know of that doesn't feature on this list, the washbasin. It is categorized separately from the general bronze accounting because this bronze didn't come from the main bronze operating account; it came from a wholly separate source from the rest of the general fund:

– וַיַּעַשׂ אֶת הַכִּיּוֹר נְחֹשֶׁת וְאֶת כְּנֹו נְחֹשֶׁת בְּמִרְאֵת הַצַּבָּאוֹת אֲשֶׁר צָבְאוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד  
He made the washbasin and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the women who amassed at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (38:8)

Rashi quotes a fascinating Midrash that when the women of Israel wanted to donate their makeup mirrors to the Mishkan fund, Moshe considered rejecting these mirrors since they are, on their face, tools of immodesty. Notionally correct, humans use cosmetics to enhance their appearance, aesthetically speaking. While not the same, physical attractiveness is tightly correlated with sexual attractiveness, so cosmetics and makeup, superficially at least, serve the purposes of desire and lust, which are more aligned with the evil inclination – תאוּוה. But despite this, God interceded and instructed Moshe to readily accept these mirrors, declaring them the dearest of all contributions.

The subtext of this unusual vignette is that when the enslaved men in Egypt were exhausted and spent from backbreaking forced labor, they no longer wanted to be with their wives, the thought being that with no more children, their misery would come to an end. To counter this, the women would bring their husbands food and drink and use these personal makeup mirrors to seduce them with great success, directly resuscitating the imperiled future of the Jewish People. Rather than simply

perceiving these actions as mere gratuitous and mundane acts of the flesh, God recognized their heroic valor in the Jewish People's hour of great need.

Let's recall the stated point of Pharaoh's enslavement of the Jewish People was for population control; their fertility was a threat so Egypt pursued oppressive policies to suppress it. But it didn't work, and this teaching credits the brave Jewish women for that. It also suggests that even the most accomplished leader could fail to recognize their true value, but as our sages ultimately say, the Jewish People were saved from Egypt in the merit of righteous women.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch highlights the profound significance of how even something as mundane as a mirror, a symbol that draws attention to the human body as an object of sensual desire, can be co-opted and integrated into Divine service.

The symbolism goes deep; the washbasin functions to consecrate hands and feet, which means we can elevate and refine our simple flesh and blood bodies. There is no separate track for holy things – we create holiness through our actions and footsteps. The mirrors we might have thought of as a source of impurity are sacred and become the washbasin, the source of purity.

The separate accounting of the women's bronze mirrors contains an essential and illuminating insight into the role of intimacy. It's taboo to discuss, tainted as it so often is with guilt and shame, and yet one of its tools became not only a central feature in the Mishkan but quite plausibly the dearest donation of the lot!

It is imperative to separate what's kosher from what's not, right from wrong. The laws of איסורי ביאה and ערוה are extremely severe and have catastrophic consequences highlighted by, among others, Hoshea and Yirmiyahu. They matter! But we must remember that the very first commandment from God to humans is to be fruitful and multiply. The Sefer Hachinuch observes that the mitzvah's essential nature is that God desires a world populated with life. This is intuitive because we are designed to precisely that specification, along with every other living thing. It's a defining feature of being a living thing!

Judaism is highly focused on the purity of our sexuality. Adam and Chava were created naked and felt no shame until later in the story when they ate from the Tree of Knowledge. There was nothing intrinsically bad about their bodies, and so no shame associated with it; they were living expressions of holiness even in their natural state. Only once they gained a deeper perception and understanding of consciousness could they comprehend the notion that sexuality could be immoral and their nakedness could be shameful and embarrassing.

We often childishly characterize Satan as this evil other at odds with God's purposes, but this could not be more wrong. Satan is a trusted member in good standing of God's forces and has a decisive and important role to play in the universe's destiny. Nechama Leibowitz teaches that the same impulses which can lead us to destruction can equally lead us to sanctity – to building our families and





perpetuating the future. Our sages recognized the need to serve God with our better and worse inclinations – כְּלֵל־לְבָבָךְ – literally, “hearts,” in the plural.

While we may categorize desire as originating in the baser or evil inclination, we must recognize its necessity as an essential precursor to life, to the extent that the Midrash labels that evil inclination as “very good.” Like eating or drinking, it is an essential biological driving force that is integrated and synonymous with being alive. When controlled and channeled in the appropriate context, it can be sacred.

R’ Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz teaches that Judaism does not exist to quell or quash the forces of human nature; the constraints of the Torah’s laws leave room for those forces to be beneficial and constructive. As the famous song goes, beauty and grace are vain but vain only in the sense that they are transient, that there is more to life than preoccupation with your image. But vain doesn’t mean they are bad; beauty is a gift, and modesty should not be properly understood as a denial of it.

We may even think that beauty, desire, and sexuality are good in our homes but still inappropriate in the Mishkan, a place where we strive to be above any distraction and focus on God, where physical impulses should remain outside. And yet, speaking directly to this notion, Rashi and our sages straightforwardly and unambiguously point out that God does not see it that way. If we still think it’s inappropriate, we need to recalibrate – קָבַל, פִּי אֱלֹהֵי קְבִיבוֹן עָלַי מִן הַכֹּל –

The separate treatment of the women’s makeup mirrors highlight that intimacy and everything associated with it can be sacred and what God considers among the dearest thing we have.

Human desire can be elevated into the sanctified life force of Judaism, showcased by the persistence of the Jewish women who saved the Jewish People.

## The Unburning Bush

5 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most iconic scenes in the Torah is the burning bush. It is the turning point in the Exodus story; having described the cruel extent of the Jewish People’s enslavement and suffering, the burning bush is the moment God reaches out to Moshe to intervene, setting events in motion that will upend the entire order of our world.

Moshe has fled Egypt as a fugitive and has built a new identity and life as a shepherd in Midian. One day in the wilderness, he chases a stray lamb and encounters the arcane:

וּמִשָּׁה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת-צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתְנֹו כִּהְיוּ מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הַר הָאֱלֹקִים חֹרֵב: וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת-אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וַהֲנִיָּה הַסֵּנֶה בֵּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינֶנּוּ אֶפְלָי: ... וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יִתְרוֹ קְרַב הָלֵם שְׁלִי-נִעְלִיךָ מֵעַל רִגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו

אֲדַמְתִּי קִדְשׁ הוּא... וַיֹּאמֶר ה' רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקוֹתָם שְׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־מִכְאֲבָיו... וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחֲץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם... וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲהַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהַיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר: צַעֲקוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהַיָּה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהַיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם: Now Moshe, tending the flock of his father-in-law Yisro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He saw, and there was a bush in flames, yet the bush was not consumed... And He said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground...” And the Lord continued, “I have seen the plight of My people in Egypt and have hear their cry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their suffering... Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them... And God said to Moshe, “I will be what I will be.” He continued, “Tell the Israelites, “I Will Be,” sent me to you.” (3:1,2,5,7,9,14)

Apart from its significance in the broader story the Torah tells, this is one of the vanishingly rare instances of a theophany, a physical manifestation of the divine in a tangible, observable way, which is always accompanied by an upending of the natural order – the appearance of physics-bending supernatural properties.

As we know it, fire is inseparable from burning – they are the same. There is no such thing as burning without the consumption a fuel source. All fire requires fuel to combust, which is what generates the flame.

This interaction is cryptic, and the imagery is deliberate; God doesn't act gratuitously or because it sounds cool – although it certainly does!

Why does God chooses a burning bush to communicate with Moshe – rather, a bush that does not burn?

God's introduction is important and, in a way, tells us a lot about what God wants us to know about Him. God says He is אֲהַיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהַיָּה, a complex form of the word “to be.” It might mean “I am what I am,” or perhaps “I will be what I will be.”

The Midrash expounds on this conversation and says that when God seeks to be seen as compassionate, God is called Hashem. When God desires justice, God is called God. What that means, then, is that God is fluid and free-spirited, always in a state of being and becoming, defying any single definition. We can not understand God as God is, only what God does.

This encounter also reveals where God can be found. In the wilderness, in the void, in the middle of nowhere – בְּמִדְבָּר; in the middle of apparent destruction, in the burning pain of exile – בְּעַר בָּאֵשׁ; and in the low places, in nature – מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּבְיָה.

God tells Moshe to remove his shoes because the place he stands is holy soil; a person who lives with the awareness that the place you stand is also the place God is found lives with the secret of creation, that the Divine is here with us.



R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that the story of the burning bush is a metaphor that contains the imagery and symbolism of Moshe's place in everything to come. Moshe was in the desert, and God appeared before Moshe noticed; God was already there. God is there, and engages Moshe specifically because he notices the bush – וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו – וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו. What Moshe notices isn't a burning bush but an unburning bush, that the fire doesn't seem to consume the bush – מִדְּוֵעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה –

R' Shlomo Farhi suggests that this contains a crucial insight into what qualified Moshe, above all others, to be the lawgiver and redeemer of the Jewish People, trusted over all others. In difficulty, positive and upbeat people will attempt to focus and redirect towards positivity; they tell us to look on the bright side; it could be worse, but it's part of God's plan. Pessimistic people will say how terrible and unfortunate it is, how bad things are and how much they hurt.

Neither is wrong, but this story teaches us something else entirely. Moshe sees past the bush that is on fire; he sees a fire that does not consume, which, as applied to the circumstances of his people, suggests an attitude of recognizing the devastating pain of his people but falling well short of ruin, Moshe notices, recognizes, and appreciates that the fire will not consume the bush, and understands that the fires of Egypt will not consume his people.

This is worlds away from focusing on the positive – that at least they won't get destroyed! He can hold the notion of their suffering in mind without a diminished understanding of the nature of what they were; totally on fire, yet still fundamentally whole, unbroken, and unbeaten.

When people are confronted by ordeals, they typically ignore the searing fire of the ordeal, putting their heads in the sand and ignoring the pain of whatever transition is taking place; or they focus on the upheaval, pain, and turmoil, the essence of who they are giving way entirely to the ordeal. God wants Moshe to see the fire but not to miss the properties it retained.

Moshe would not look away from a Jew getting beaten by a taskmaster, and he would not look away from Jews fighting each other. He didn't ignore their hurt, nor did he magnify it. He didn't say they'd be okay or to get over it. He didn't passively witness any of those things; he actively engaged with them.

The Zohar suggests that the burning bush was a hint that even though the Israelites were suffering in Egypt and would suffer many exiles, they had God's protection and would not be consumed; as the thornbush is the least of the plants, the Jewish People occupied a lowly and despised position in Egypt, and the burning fire was a symbol of their oppression. The bush burning yet not being consumed symbolized that the oppressed people would not be destroyed by those who were attacking them and that their hostility would be ultimately unsuccessful and fruitless.

The Midrash teaches that God feels our pain and that God is a partner in our troubles.

The burning bush can also be seen as symbolizing the divine presence among the Israelites during the time of Moses and their journey to freedom. It is also an image of God's presence and protection in



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the face of danger and oppression. The fire symbolizes God's power, the fact it doesn't consume the bush, God's mercy, and compassion.

It reveals where God is to be found – in hard times and places, right there alongside us.

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a niche business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I want to talk to home care companies, so if you know anybody in the home care industry, please introduce me!*

**PPS** - *It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **7 people** find jobs so far!*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.