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בכ"ה

Parashat Shemot Part III At the Burning Bush, I

1. Introduction and Setting

After the Torah narrated some basic details concerning Moses' early life, it shifts back to the national state of affairs. G-d's intervention begins to change from "behind the scenes" to overt. The turning point is depicted in a three-verse passage, with especially rich diction, that speaks of Israel's cries and of G-d's decision to invoke His covenant with the patriarchs. We will discuss several details of this passage.

The Egyptian king died. At a time when it was usual for the new ruler to extend broad amnesty and a degree of relief to the suffering, the burden upon the Israelites remained crushing. "The Israelites groaned from the workload and they cried out; their pleas rose to G-d from the workload and G-d heard their moans. G-d recalled His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. G-d saw the [the situation of the] Israelites and G-d knew [probably meaning: 'what He was to do']" (Exod. 2:23-25).

The cries of the Israelites are expressed in four successive clauses, each verbalizing a distinct nuance of crying out in pain: וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ נִזְעָקָתָם-שׁוֹעָתָם-נִאֲקָתָם-יִנְגַּחַו. G-d's response is correspondingly articulated with four successive verbal clauses, each of which connotes another dimension of attentiveness or response: וַיַּעֲמֹד יְהֹוָה עַל-עַד יְהֹוָה עַל-עַד יְהֹוָה עַל-עַד. The first of the four terms of G-d's response is part of the clause that contains the fourth term of Israel's cries: "G-d heard their moans." Thus, the two subunits of four distinct expressions are joined into a unit of eight. The text reflects the covenant coming into active play. It is noteworthy that the passage contains forty words. The next verse opens the burning bush passage and the selection of Moses (Exod. 3:1).

Moses is introduced as shepherding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. As this is the

first time Moses' father-in-law is termed *Jethro* he is referred to with the relationship and title. The appellation *Jethro* is derived from the root that means "more," or "abundance," possibly connoting "excellence." In the previous chapter (Exod. 2), Moses' father-in-law is termed Reuel, "friend of G-d".

In Numbers 10:29, Moses speaks to הֽוּבָב בֶּן רְשָׂאָל הַמִּדְיָנִי חָתָן מִשְׁׁה ("Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law"). Some parse the latter clause to mean that Hobab is *hoten Moshe*, Moses' father-in-law, while Reuel is Hobab's father (see *Sifre Beha'alotekha*). A straightforward reading of Exodus 2, however, does not accord with seeing Reuel as the grandfather of Moses' wife. Some parse the Numbers 10:29 verse to mean that Hobab was Moses' brother-in-law while the words *hoten Moshe* refer to Reuel. In Judges 4:11, however, Hobab himself is termed "*hoten Moshe*." Perhaps (following Ibn Ezra), *hoten* is a term not restricted to a father-in-law but indicates a relationship through marriage, applying also to brother-in-law.

The different names given to Moses' father-in-law in various contexts are difficult to reconcile.

On an occasion when Moses led the sheep *aħar hamidbar*, apparently westward into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, he came to הַר הַאֲלֹקִים חֶרְבָּה, "the mountain of G-d, Horeb." Although Horeb was a relatively long distance from Midian, dedicated shepherds were known to travel far for good pastureland. A successful shepherd was an individual with great concern and compassion for his flock, gently leading it to grazing, water, sun and shade as the need arose. He protected it from predators, the elements and pitfalls and cared for each animal from newly born to aged to infirm. Accordingly, in the refined circles of the ancient world the occupation was

highly respected and considered priming for virtuous leadership.

Leaders were frequently depicted as shepherds, and in *Tanakh* the Deity is often so described. Psalm 23 famously elaborates on His protecting, guiding and comforting characteristics in terms of a shepherd leading his flock. In an instance of G-d's criticism of the nation's leaders wherein they were addressed as shepherds, the metaphor is elaborated: "You have not sustained the weak, healed the sick, or bandaged the injured; you have not returned the strayed or sought the lost, but you have governed them with your might and unfairly;...scattered they have become prey for every wild beast" (Ezek. 34:4-5).

Did Moses intentionally lead the sheep to *Har HaElokim* ("the mountain of G-d")? Some assume it received its sacred designation as a result of its being the future location of G-d's Revelation to Israel. However, that explanation does not fit the unfolding literary structure of the Book of Exodus, for it would uncharacteristically diminish the dramatic effect that the narrative takes great care to construct. It would inform the reader of the successful conclusion of Moses' mission before it began, while the narrative continuously maintains heightened tension as to what will transpire. From Moses' reluctance to accept G-d's charge to Pharaoh's ongoing resistance to G-d's commands, from the Israelites' deafness to G-d's message to the Egyptian pursuit of their erstwhile slaves, the final outcome is presented as always in doubt. Although the Torah should not be thought of and studied as mere "literature," its composition has been recognized as meeting highly sophisticated literary norms. An interpretation that is consistent with such norms is thus to be preferred.

From G-d's instruction to Moses to remove his shoes because the site is holy (v. 5), it appears that the site is already holy. In Deuteronomy 33:16 G-d is described as *שְׁכַנֵּי סְנָה*, the One who dwells in the bush, apparently referring to the burning bush, the location Moses was at in our narrative. No other bush is a candidate for that designation. That G-d dwells in the bush means that this bush is a site invested with His holiness. Subsequent to Moses' theophany at the bush, but before revelation, Aaron meets Moses at *Har HaElokim* (Exod. 4:27). Jethro also goes to *Har HaElokim* to meet Moses (18:5). (The latter point is

only relevant to our discussion if we assume Jethro came before revelation, in accordance with textual order, a matter of dispute among the sages.) It seems likely that the site of *Har HaElokim* was known as possessing religious significance prior to Israel's interaction with it, perhaps because it was a spiritual center of sorts for the nomadic tribes of the region.

According to some present-day scholars, during the second millennium B.C.E. there had been developing among nomadic tribes in that region certain modes of religious expression without actual idolatry. We may assume that Jethro, the priest of Midian whose daughter Moses chose to marry and in whose domain he agreed to live for a lengthy period of time, was a prominent leader of those who were developing a nonidolatrous expression of religion. The various names the Torah calls him by, whether Jethro, Reuel or Hobab, all signify extremely positive qualities. (If some of those names apply to his father or son, it also reflects well on him.)

Jethro does make a significant contribution to Israel with his counsel concerning the judiciary. In the second year from the Exodus Moses endeavors to convince Hobab (apparently his father-in-law) to stay with Israel (Num. 10:29-32). Exodus 18:12 relates that Aaron and all the elders of Israel ate from Jethro's sacrificial offering, indicating that he possessed an acceptable spiritual orientation. Perhaps some Midianite tribes, derived from Abraham (Gen. 25:2), preserved some of the values the patriarch had imparted to them to be suffused into the world. (See our comments on ה 'מִסְעֵנִי פָּא in our *Vezot Haberakhah Part I* study.)

2. The Burning Bush

The sight of a burning bush that does not get consumed attracts Moses' attention. Curious, he turns aside to inspect this amazing phenomenon, wondering as to its explanation. When G-d sees that he pursued the matter – the text makes a point of this – He called out to him. In His approach to man, G-d takes a first step and then awaits man's receptivity and initiative before proceeding.

What is the symbolism of the burning bush? As G-d called to Moses from it, informing him that the site was holy and given that the Torah refers to G-d as

שְׁכַנֵּי סְנָה, the One who “dwells” in the bush (Deut. 33:16), many have thought it likely that the symbolism refers to basic characteristics of the divine presence. An ongoing flame that does not require any outside substance for its perpetuation may signify G-d’s permanence, His independence and His superiority over natural forces. Such background motifs fit the scene well. They correspond to important aspects of the message G-d communicates to Moses and instructs him to transmit to the Israelites when He answers Moses’ question of “When they ask me, ‘what is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” as we shall discuss shortly.

Others maintain that both the textual depiction of the phenomenon Moses saw, “And behold the bush is burning with fire and the bush is not consumed,” as well as Moses’ rhetorical query, “Why does the bush not get burned?” point to a different explanation. The most prominent feature is the bush’s endurance through expected destruction. Thus, the burning bush may symbolize Israel, mightily oppressed in Egypt, but surviving, of course with supernatural help, another background motif to the revelation experience.

Another possibility is that the focus is on G-d’s covenant with the patriarchs. It has endured, albeit in a low profile, but it will not be extinguished. G-d does not forget. That is the backdrop of all G-d is now informing Moses about.

3. Autonomy of the Prophet

G-d calls to Moses and he answers (“Here I am”). After revealing His presence, G-d calls upon Moses to be His agent to go to Pharaoh and deliver Israel from Egypt. Moses demurs, saying, מִי אַנְכִי וּמָכֹר which in *peshat* translates, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring out the children of Israel from Egypt?” (Exod. 3:11). This question manifests great humility as well as natural anxieties. Moses assumes such a mission requires certain talents that he knows he does not possess.

G-d responds כִּי אַתָּה עִמָּךְ (“for I will be with you”). Moses presents a second objection. Assuming he went to the Israelites and told them that the G-d of their fathers appeared to him, “They will ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what can I say to them?” Again G-d

answers him. Moses responds a third time: “But they will not believe me and will not hearken to my voice.” G-d then gives him supportive signs, wonders that he may perform before the people. Again Moses resists, this time based on the fact that he has a speech impediment. Again G-d assures him. Finally, Moses just refuses. He was as polite as possible but didn’t articulate a clear-cut reason; apparently he still didn’t feel confident he could succeed. At this point G-d takes a stronger tack.

Many have asked, how is it possible for a human being who was in prophetic communion with G-d, who has just responded *hineni*, indicating his commitment to fulfill His request, refuse to do so?

This passage teaches that even an individual who has achieved the lofty spiritual status of experiencing prophecy from G-d, even while in the midst of that transcendent state, is not totally swallowed up by the grandeur of the event. He does not lose his sense of integrity and free will. He maintains autonomy together with his personal perspective. It is clear that G-d acknowledges the legitimacy of Moses’ questions and concerns and endeavors to answer them and that the prophet is only expected to accept a mission that he can understand and relate to. However, when the questions are adequately answered the human being is expected to acquiesce. G-d did not recognize Moses’ fifth objection as legitimate.

4. “And This Is the Sign for You”

In answering Moses’ first question, G-d informs him of a sign that will indicate that He has delegated him for this mission: וְזֹה לְךָ הַזֶּה כִּי אַنְכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךְ (“And this is the sign for you that I have sent you” [Exod. 3:12]). What is the sign?

It does not appear that it is the supernatural phenomenon of the burning bush, since Moses did not require a private sign – he was receiving his instructions directly from G-d. Also, Moses observed and appreciated the burning bush before his question. Neither does the sign appear to be the future ongoing successful performance of his mission that was implied in G-d’s assurance that He will be with him, which Moses may very well assume would be a series of wondrous phenomena amazing to all observers. Such evidence appears too intangible for the specific

and concrete statement נזֶה לְךָ הַאוֹת, “and this shall be for you the sign.” Furthermore, neither of the above interpretations fit well with the continuation of the verse, “When you bring the people out of Egypt you shall serve G-d on this mountain.”

Some commentators have addressed this problem (see Rashi, following *Exodus Rabbah*) by interpreting Moses’ initial response of verse 11 בַּי אֲנִכִּי כִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים מִמְצָרִים פְּרֻעָה וְכִי אָזְצִיא אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (“Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the children of Israel out from Egypt?”) as two distinct questions. The first refers to his own sense of inadequacy to go to Pharaoh and the second focuses on the Israelites’ lack of merit to deserve such divine intervention. In this way the end of G-d’s response in verse 12 does not have to continue the thought of the beginning of that verse as it may be construed as G-d’s answer to the supposed second question. G-d would be answering that Israel will have merit in the near future when they come to this site.

However, in straightforward reading “Who am I” clearly applies both to going to Pharaoh and to leading the Israelites out of Egypt; Moses is asking one compound question, expressing his feeling of personal inadequacy for the mission on two counts. Secondly, complaining about the Israelites lack of merit is not in the spirit of his remarks or in accordance with what we know of his character, despite his having had a terrible experience when he rebuked the man who was hitting his fellow. He cannot be arguing that the Israelites should be left in their dire slavery. Finally, the verse lacks the necessary critical words concerning or pointing to the Israelites’ shortcomings or their lack of merit.

Following the Rambam, it appears that “and this is the sign for you that I have sent you” refers to what follows in verse 12, namely, the post-Exodus event of the nation worshipping G-d on הר הַאֲלֹקִים, associated with revelation. (In modern punctuation, a colon would be placed before the last segment of the verse.) The event of revelation will illuminate many doubtful matters to the people (*MT, Fundamentals of the Torah* 8:2). Thus, after addressing Moses’ humility and natural fears, G-d informs him of an important detail concerning his mission. A true sign is not yet available for all to know that G-d did in fact delegate him, that He was with him and accomplished the great

wonders in Egypt. But such a sign will be available in the near future.*

This statement anticipates what surely was another fear of Moses, which G-d’s assurance of being with him – implying wondrous deeds – brings to the fore. The unprecedented concept of a mortal human functioning as a divinely appointed prophet-messenger would not easily be properly understood; Moses may be misinterpreted and imagined to be another one of the many Egyptian חרטומִים וּמְכַשְּׁפִים (soothsayers and sorcerers) who supposedly possessed supernatural powers. This was an especially relevant fear in ancient Egypt where religion and culture were steeped in many forms of magic and wonder-working.

Thus, the sign G-d proffered was not to persuade Moses that he would be able to successfully perform his responsibilities: He had already fully addressed that fear when He told him that He will be with him. The sign was intended to comfort Moses, to inform him that after the great mission is accomplished, in the foreseeable future, there will be proof to others that he was indeed G-d’s messenger. At the revelation, G-d refers to this when He says, “Lo, I come to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also trust in you for ever” (Exod. 19:9).

This information regarding a sign implies an additional aspect of G-d’s plans; with it, He reveals that He intends to proceed with the redemption regardless of the Israelites’ lack of understanding and appreciation of what is truly transpiring. He is providing Moses insight into a process to which he could relate. Only further in the dialogue (4:1), when Moses expresses fear that the people will not believe him even to the basic extent necessary to get the project started, is he provided signs of a different nature to help persuade the people – signs presumably of lesser import.

5. Regarding G-d’s Name

Moses’ second question was: “When they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” (v. 13). A name connotes one’s particular identifying features, differentiating that individual from all others. In this case Moses may be referring to what would be a convincing demonstration to the people that indeed

the G-d of their fathers appeared to him. Undoubtedly, the elders had a tradition regarding this matter. Jacob had transmitted his prophecy that G-d would one day intervene to bring the nation back to its land and Joseph had made his trust in G-d's promise explicit. But under bondage and oppression the tradition may have faded considerably. Moses wonders how could he adequately describe the G-d of their fathers and convincingly connect with their tradition. G-d responds with a comprehensive pronouncement regarding His name.

The first three words of G-d's answer are *E-H-Y-H asher E-H-Y-H* (v. 14), often translated as "I will be who I will be," or "I will be what I will be," a term apparently related to the Tetragrammaton, G-d's ineffable Y-H-V-H name. Many have taken it as the first-person future form of that name.** The phrase appears to connote much more than the two great ontological principles that have been seen to reside in it, namely, G-d's eternal existence and His absolute freedom from any restraining forces. (To a certain degree the former, but particularly the latter, were concepts that could not easily exist in the pagan mind and were virtually unknown to the polytheistic world. Their gods, by the very nature of their multiplicity and various domains of power, were limited by each other and by the mighty primordial forces. To Israel, these principles are vital fundamentals.) The Tetragrammaton also appears to denote G-d's ongoing creative activity (related to the verb *מִהוּא* "brings into being"), pointing to His power to fulfill His promises. (We will further discuss the meaning of the Tetragrammaton in our *Va'era Part I* study.)

In addition, the Tetragrammaton, and the *E-H-Y-H asher E-H-Y-H* name that is related to it, refer to several derivative concepts that directly flow from the basic principles, as G-d Himself points out in His continuing elucidation. These were then of particularly practical application to the Israelites. After G-d enunciates His name, He instructs Moses to

inform the people, "*E-H-Y-H* has sent me to you." To say "I will be" a single time in such a context is not a clearly comprehensible statement. Rather, its meaning appears to be connected to the fact that it recalls the phrase G-d employed two verses before (v. 12a) when He told Moses, *כִּי אֶתְּנָהּ עִמֶּךָ* ("for I will be with you"). G-d's name, *E-H-Y-H asher E-H-Y-H*, is associated with His statement that "I will be with you."

In the following verse (v. 15) G-d elaborates further, instructing Moses to inform the people: "Hashem, the G-d of your fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob has sent me to you, this is My name forever" (v. 15). This indicates that His name connotes His faithfulness through the centuries to those loyal to Him; the present generation is now the beneficiary of the great merit of their forefathers. The phrase *כִּי אֶתְּנָהּ עַד עוֹלָם* ("This is My name forever") is to make clear that, in harmony with His essential nature, this characteristic of His is permanent and unchanging.

Most of these concepts appear again in a later passage that G-d instructs Moses to transmit to the Israelites (Exod. 6:2-8). They comprise a major, majestic proclamation by G-d that is the formal expansion of the message He gave Moses at the burning bush.

Endnotes

* In our *Parashat Va'era Part I* study we adduce strong support for this interpretation from an analysis of the structure of G-d's message to Israel in Exodus 6:6-7 concerning the various steps of redemption.

** The third letter of the Tetragrammaton, here denoted by a "v," is actually the letter denoted by a "w" sound, a semivowel, which makes the linkage clearer. The "v" is used here so as not to cause unnecessary pronunciation of the divine name.