

Parashat Shemot, 5774, 2013:

Understanding the Hidden Meaning of the Burning Bush

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Thanks in large part to modern advertising, we have become accustomed to a “bigger the better” mentality. For example, one need only visit Times Square in New York City to be bombarded with enormous videos and super-sized electronic billboards. In addition, every inch of space competes for our eyes and attention. The advertisers clearly base their practices upon the following formula: Huge Presentations = Consumer Attention.

In contrast, transformative Jewish historical events have taken place quite often amidst near silence, and in the throws of existential loneliness. Our *parasha* provides us with just such an occurrence:

Moses was pasturing the flocks of Jethro, his father in law, the Chief of Midian, and he led the flocks after the free pastureland, and he came to the mountain of G-d, to Horeb. An angel of the L-rd appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thornbush, and behold, the thornbush was burning with fire, but the thornbush was not being consumed. So Moses said, “Let me turn now and see this great spectacle why does the thornbush not burn up?” (*Sefer Shemot* 3:1-3, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

The miracle of the burning bush took place in the Sinai Desert. Moshe was completely alone and almost certainly lonely. It was here, “from within the thornbush,” that he first encountered G-d via His emissary – “An angel of the L-rd.” We must remember that Yitro, Moshe’s father in law, was “the Chief of Midian” and more than likely possessed

large tracts of land and beautiful buildings. Therefore, Hashem could have revealed Himself to Moshe by the side of a beautiful stream, in the midst of a luxuriant field, at the top of a majestic mountain, or in Yitro's resplendent palace. Why, then, did G-d choose to appear to Moshe in a howling wasteland and from the innermost part of the lowliest of all desert plants – a mere thornbush?

I believe that *Midrash Tanchuma* (Warsaw), *Sefer Shemot* 14:14, provides us with an approach that answers both of our questions:

And why [did Hashem reveal Himself] from the thornbush and not from a great and mighty tree or from a date palm? The Holy One Blessed be He said: "It is written in the Torah: 'I am with him in his misery and distress.' [*Sefer Tehillim* 91:15]. They [i.e. the Jewish people] are in a state of abject slavery; therefore, I, too, will reveal Myself in the thorn bush and from a place of distress..."

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, utilized this *Midrash* to emphasize Hashem's indissoluble connection to our people – even in the darkest night and the deepest travail: "When Israel experiences life as if it were a thorny bush, when Israel lives a degraded, foul life, I am with her; I share her pain." Rav Soloveitchik continued this mode of analysis in the following words:

When man encounters disaster, G-d is *immo* [with him]; His presence rises up. "Then the L-rd answered Job out of the whirlwind" (Job 38:1). Even when a man finds himself in the depths of disaster and tragedy, even when he has lost everything that he had, G-d does not desert him. All individuals experience darkness at some point, finding themselves in the whirlwind of unexpected troubles. G-d resides even in that whirlwind... This is *shokheni seneh*, G-d who resides in the thornbush. (*Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, page 82, brackets my own)

Moshe ultimately understood that Hashem's manifestation of His presence in the "thornbush [that] was burning with fire, but ... was not being consumed," was more than a discrete action of the Almighty. Rather, it represented a distinct characteristic of our

Creator: "...and through the desire of the One Who dwells in the thornbush." (*Sefer Devarim* 33:16) The Rav formulated this idea in the following manner: "The fact that G-d dwelt in a thornbush becomes an attribute of the Almighty, and He exhibits *ratzon*, in the sense of love..." (Ibid.)

We are now able to understand the miracle of the burning bush in an entirely novel and profound manner: It was not a one-time event in Jewish history, but rather a metaphoric description of the Almighty Himself. Therefore, the lowly burning thornbush can serve as a beacon of light to each of us in our hour of greatest pain and need. Moreover, it shines throughout all the generations continuously teaching us that we are never alone, for when we suffer, Hashem is surely with us. Thus, King David said: "Even when I walk in the valley of darkness, I will fear no evil for You are with me..." (*Sefer Tehillim* 23:4) May this profound truth be ever upon our lips and in our hearts. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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