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Within Every Jew, A Burning Bush

Upon seeing the burning bush Moshe said to himself, 'I must pause and attempt to understand this enthralling site', "מדוע לא יבער הסנה" "Why will the bush not burn?" (*Sh'mot* 3:3)

Studying this unforgettable event today we must also seek to apprehend the messages conveyed in this vision.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt"l suggested the following three exquisite lessons:

1. What Did God's Voice Sound Like?

The Midrash says that when God spoke it sounded just like Moshe's father's voice (*Sh'mot Rabbah* 3:1). For a moment Moshe thought that his father was somehow there, that apparently he came to see him.

The midrash posits this surprising interpretation based on one word in the pasuk "God said, "I am the God of your **father**, the God of Abraham, Isaac and the God of Yaakov"; then Moshe hid his face

because he was afraid of looking at God." (*Sh'mot* 3:6). The verse references Moshe's father.

This is the very first time that the lines of communication were opened between the Master of the World and Moshe. The Rav taught: "The mere fact that Amram's voice was the medium or the implement which the Almighty chose in order to get acquainted with Moshe tells us something very important. It's important to the modern Jew, perhaps even more so than it was to Moshe" (*The Rav Thinking Aloud*, Holzer, pp. 25-26).

The Rav continued and explained based on his own experience. He said that many people he has interacted with over the years shy away from Judaism because they say it is too rigid. They say that the biblical God is angry, vengeful, and vindictive. The Father in Heaven is stern and unforgiving.

This concept is completely false. Judaism is like a mother and father. It is a very tender religion. It is saturated with sympathy and love.

The Rav cited the Rambam, often described as the great rationalist, describing a Jew's relationship with God: "What is the proper love? A person should love God exceedingly...a person's mind should be tied to loving God, and he is preoccupied

with it constantly [or: singing about it constantly - *Raavad 7*] as if he were lovesick with the illness of love of a woman, whom he thinks about constantly...More than this should be a person's love for God..." (*Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 10:3*)

At the Burning Bush Moshe took the position that the Jewish people deserved punishment (see Rashi on the pasuk). The Holy One blessed Be He had to convince him he was making a mistake about the Jewish people. The message of the first encounter is the Almighty as being warm-hearted and tender loving father or mother.

2. A Fire At the Core

The bush was shaped like a circle with a fire in the center, and the fire did not spread to the periphery. The Rav posited that this is what Rashi was pointing to when he interpreted the phrase *be'labat eish* as *b'lev eish* (3:2). *Lev* (heart) means the center. So when Moshe asked '*madua lo yiv'ar ha'sneh*' (3:3), he was not asking, "why is the bush not consumed?", but, "why does the fire not spread to the periphery?" The fire was confined to one point in the center. Moshe was asking "what type of fire is limited to a point and does not spread?" (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Shemos*, p.22).

The message to Moshe, who had lost faith in his brothers in the aftermath of the fight between Dan and Aviram, was to perceive the potential found in the Jew. Through the appearance of the burning bush, whose fire in the center did not spread, God imparted the message that while the Jews of Egypt externally appeared cold, in their

hearts they hid a fire.

In every Jew there is a '*ratzon elyon*', a sublime desire to do that which is correct. When we look at people we must always search for the virtuous aspects in their character.

The Rav once commented: "There is now a tendency towards isolation in our Orthodoxy. I have never seen it before. I have lived in many countries and among many people, it did not exist. Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, my grandfather, never excluded a single Jew. A single Jew. And, by not excluding, not expelling, by not excommunicating, by not speaking ill when somebody passed by...If Moshe would have excommunicated the Jews of Egypt who knows what would have happened to us" (*The Rav Thinking Aloud, Sh'mot*, pp. 18-19).

The Rav expanded on this theme quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma (Sh'mot 20)* which comments on the duplicative phrase *raoh raiti, I have surely seen the affliction of my people* (3:7); "You (Moshe) see one sight, but I see two sights." After the incident of Dan and Aviram, Moshe saw a people not worthy of redemption. However, says God, I see beyond the facade. When one penetrates into the depths of the Jew, one recognizes that the Jew quests for freedom and quests for His God (*Noraot HaRav*, Vol. 8 pp. 77-78).

The Rav's beautiful interpretation appears to echo his great-grandfather's insight in his *Beit Halevi* ד"ה ראה ראיתי את עני עמי (ומו). The double language of *raoh raiti* reflects the notion that after so many years in exile

and slavery the Jewish people themselves lost a sense of their own true greatness. He offered a parable of a wealthy man now impoverished who over time no longer can conceptualize the nobility and confidence he once exuded. God knows the potential of the Jew. Although they may have forgotten their true character, God never did.

3. *Moshe Hid His Face*

Perhaps, the Rav's most breathtaking interpretation regarding the story of the *sneh*, pertains to the following pasuk: "Moshe hid his face because he was afraid to look toward God" (3:6).

The Talmud debates whether this act of Moshe was praiseworthy or not (*Berachot* 7a). Rav Yonatan maintains that it was Moshe's fear of looking at the *Shechina* which merited his becoming the greatest of prophets.

Rabbi Soloveitchik commented that it is difficult to fathom Rav Yonatan's position. Why was it so meritorious of Moshe to look away? After all, the fire of the bush was burning. The infinite light called him. The Master of the Universe waited, yet Moshe's face remained hidden. Furthermore, Moshe now had the opportunity to experience all that was hidden, to understand with clarity the ways of God. All the mysteries of the world could now be clarified.

The Rav suggested a remarkable answer. Moshe trembled in the face of complete knowledge. What frightened Moshe was if he had not turned away, he would lose his

attribute of *chessed*, the feeling of empathy and love regarding his fellow Jew. If he were to understand all the attributes and ways of God he would see there is really no evil in the world. If Moshe had this knowledge he could not perform *chessed* with a poor person, because he would understand why poverty was appropriate for that person. He could not have mercy for the sick because he would have complete understanding why God acted this way towards this person.

Man's poverty and sickness must be seen as evil and suffering and evil must be fought.

So great was Moshe's love for his Israel that he sacrificed the sublime of human striving, the knowledge of God, and chose to merit the trait of mercy and *chessed*. (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Shemos, p.25*)

This final lesson from the Rav brings to mind a most wonderful Chassidic teaching.

There is a saying that everything in the world is here for the service of God. A student once came to his master, the Alexander Rebbe, and asked him, how can one possibly serve God by being an atheist? The Rebbe answered that you have to be an atheist when someone asks a favor of you. If you believe in God, then you'll think, I will pray for you, I will bless you - but I don't need to do anything, because God will do it.

So when someone asks a favor of you, you have to be a complete atheist - as if God won't do anything - you have got to do it, there is no one else! (*Holy Brother, Halberstam, p.155*) ■