

Parashat Shemot

January 9, 2021; 25 Tevet 5781

Torah: Exodus 1:1-6:1; **Triennial** 3:1-4:17

Haftorah: Ashkenazim: Isaiah 27:6 - 28:13; 29:22 - 29:23
Sephardim Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

The World is Charged with the Grandeur of God **Ilana Kurshan**

Moshe's encounter with God at the burning bush resembles and perhaps anticipates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. In both experiences of revelation, Moshe is on a lone journey when he encounters the divine amidst fiery conflagration atop a mountain. The Hebrew word used in the Torah for the burning bush is *sneh*, a near-anagram of *Sinai*, and indeed this week's parasha, Shemot, explicitly identifies the site of Moshe's first revelation as "Horev, the mountain of the Lord," which is another name for Mount Sinai. Both times, Moshe is shepherding his flock—first his sheep, and then the people of Israel—and both experiences of revelation change him fundamentally. And yet Moshe responds dramatically differently to each divine encounter.

Whereas the revelation at Sinai was foretold by God, the burning bush catches Moshe entirely unawares. An angel of God appears to him in the flames, and Moshe finds himself unable to avert his glance: "I must turn aside to look at this

marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (3:3). God, struck that Moshe turns to look, calls out to him and identifies Himself as the God of his ancestors. What catches Moshe's attention is the unusualness of a bush that is not consumed; but what catches God's attention is that Moshe notices: "When the Lord saw that he had turned to look, God called to him out of the bush" (3:4).

This is not the first time that God has chosen as his prophet the person who stops to notice. The midrash in Genesis Rabbah (39:1) relates a parable to illustrate God's choice of Abraham. According to the midrash, Abraham may be compared to a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a residential building ablaze. He said, "Is it possible that this building lacks someone to take care of it?" At that point, the owner of the building looked out and said, "I am the owner of the building." Likewise, the midrash continues, Abraham asked, "Is it possible that this universe lacks a person to look after it?" And God responded, "I am the Master of the Universe."

It is notable that in this midrash, God is not the building superintendent, but the owner; it is Abraham whom God will appoint to "care for the building" by teaching the world about monotheism. According to the midrash, Abraham was chosen by God because he was unable to keep walking along on his way when the world was on fire. In the face of so much injustice, he demanded to know who was in charge.

Moshe also notices conflagration, but unlike Abraham, he needs to be told what it signifies. God instructs Moshe to take off his shoes because he is standing on holy ground, and then tells him, "I have marked well the plight of my people in Egypt and have heard their outcry... I am mindful of their sufferings" (3:7). God is essentially informing Moshe that He knows the world is on fire; His people are suffering and their cries have risen up to the heavens like fiery flames. And just as God previously appointed Abraham to care for the world of

which He is master, this time God will appoint Moshe to do the job.

Moshe's response to the divine call is somewhat surprising: The man who could not help but look now averts his glance: "And Moshe hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God" (3:6). Moshe will again and again try to resist his mission, insisting that he is not a man of words and that Pharaoh will not heed him. But the Talmud (Berakhot 7a) regards Moshe's response as praiseworthy. The rabbis state that as a reward for averting his glance, Moshe merited to have his countenance glow when he descended Mount Sinai following the giving of the tablets (Exodus 34:29). With this comment, the rabbis explicitly link the revelations at the *sneh* and at Sinai – Moshe's behavior in the former determines the outcome of the latter.

And yet Moshe has changed by the time he reaches Mount Sinai – he is no longer averting his glance from God, but rather demanding to catch a glimpse of the divine: "Oh let me behold Your glory" (Exodus 33:18), he pleads following the sin of the golden calf. The continuation of this Talmudic passage once again juxtaposes the *sneh* and Sinai revelations to imagine a dialogue between God and Moshe in which God says, "When I wanted to show you my glory at the burning bush, you did not want to see it, as it is stated, 'And Moshe concealed his face.' But now that you want to see my glory at Sinai, as you said, 'Oh let me behold Your glory,' I do not want to show it to you" (Berakhot 7a). The rabbis depict God and Moshe as courting lovers who can't quite get their timing right – as soon as one party tries to engage, the other loses interest. God, who chose Moshe because of his knack for noticing, tells Moshe at Sinai that there is a limit to how much even he can see and how close even he can come.

Moshe's responses to these two revelations are captured in the angelic call-and-response of the Kedushah prayer, in which some angels ask "Where is the place of His

presence?" and others respond, "The entire world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Moshe at Mount Sinai longs to see God's glory, like the angels who ask about the place of God's presence. But Moses at the burning bush is so overcome by the fiery revelation that he averts his glance, all too aware that the entire world is saturated with divinity.

Perhaps our challenge, following Moshe, is to learn not to demand evidence of the divine—"where is the place of His presence"—and instead to train ourselves to notice the spark of God wherever it may be found – on a fiery mountain, in a small burning bush off the beaten track, in a sacred encounter. As Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil....
Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod....
Nor can foot feel, being shod.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God because the whole world is filled with His glory. And we are charged to turn aside, take off our shoes, and feel the holiness of the ground beneath us – wherever we may find ourselves.

Where Should We Look for an Ethical Leader? Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Text: Shemot 3:1

And Moshe was herding the flock of Yitro his father-in-law, priest of Midian; and he drove the flock into the wilderness and came to the mountain of God, to Horeb.

- This verse is the introduction to Moshe's meeting with the burning bush and receiving his mission. Why do you think that the Torah chose, at this moment, to give us a detailed description of his work?
- Why does he take the flock to the wilderness? (A "midbar", wilderness, is not devoid of vegetation, but the rainfall is low, making unsuitable for cultivation.)

Commentary: Midrash Tanhuma Shemot 7

And Moshe was herding the flock ... The Holy One, blessed be He, does not confer greatness upon a man until He tests him in lesser things...when Moshe tended the flock of Jethro ... he led them to the wilderness to distance them from robbing. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You have been found trustworthy with regard to sheep; now I shall entrust My flock to you that you may shepherd it, as it is said: You lead Your people like a flock, by the hand of Moshe and Aaron (Ps.77:21)

- Why was Moshe chosen to lead the people of Israel? What skills or values might be prevalent in a good shepherd?
- Why is the term "robbery (*gezel*)," rather than theft, used to describe sheep eating in the field of others?
- Based on the approach of this Midrash, what professions might yield trustworthy leaders?

Commentary: Rashi Shemot 3:1

He drove the flock into the wilderness – *To keep a distance from robbery, so that they should not graze in other people's fields.*

- According to Rashi's reading, what is the Torah telling us about Moshe's ethics a moment before he is given the mission of his life?
- Why might we not have defined flocks grazing by the field of people as robbery? Why would this example be used to show Moshe's ethics?
- A question of close reading: Note the difference between Rashi's carefully worded comment and the Midrash. (Rashi was familiar with the Midrash.) Who is distanced from robbery in each? Why do you think that Rashi made the change and what did he achieve by doing so?
- For those interested in investigating Rashi's attitude towards robbery (*gezel*), here is a partial list: Rashi on Bereshit 6:13, 13:7, 24:10.

Searching for Sense Bex Stern Rosenblatt

Judaism and the Jewish people survive and thrive because their teachings and traditions are carefully passed down from one generation to the next. Each successive generation takes upon itself the mantle to continue the unbroken chain. Our peoplehood depends on it. And yet, sometimes that chain is broken. When one generation fails, how is the next generation to learn how to act? Can children learn without people to teach them?

These questions animate this week's parasha and haftarah. This week, we begin the book of Exodus. After the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis's obsession with ensuring correct succession, with passing down blessing to their offspring, Exodus begins with the separation of Moses from his tradition, to be raised in the house of the daughter of Pharaoh. Moreover, all the tribes of Israel have lost sight of the promise, enslaved as they are. The chain of tradition seems to have been broken.

Isaiah addresses the problem directly. Our haftarah pronounces destruction for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The leaders of the kingdom have failed. In chapter 28:7-8, Isaiah says, "Priest and prophet are wrong due to strong wine, they are swallowed up by wine and have gone astray. From strong wine they are wrong in vision, they stumble in judgement. For all the tables are full of vomit and excrement, there is no space." The ones in charge have incapacitated themselves. Rather than teaching the children how to live in this world, the leaders have become like children themselves, reduced to the basest bodily functions.

Isaiah continues, "To whom should he teach knowledge? And who can be made to understand the message? To those being weaned from milk? To those drawn from the breasts?" In this week's parasha, however, Moses literally retains his connection to his people through his mother's milk. Even as the formal transmission of knowledge has been cut off, Moses is bound to his tradition

through his nursing. In Isaiah, being drawn away from mother's milk, the people are cut off and all that is left is vomit and excrement.

And indeed, the people seem to lose their ability to speak. Just as children who have been abandoned, they cannot put sounds together to make words. Isaiah 28:10 contains the enigmatic phrase, '*tzav le-tsav, kav le-kav.*' The meaning of this phrase is uncertain. It is often translated as incoherent babbling, what the people of Israel hear and produce. It is also thought to represent part of an abecedarly (listing of the alphabet,) used to help children learn. Here, it appears in a fragment, the remnant of a tradition no longer able to be passed down. Isaiah continues, saying that the words will be spoken, "with stammering speech and in another language."

Moses is another child of stammering speech. In our parasha, he tells God, "I am not a man of words... I am heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue." And yet, when Moses is confronted with God's most enigmatic phrase, Moses understands. Moses has asked for God's name. God replies, "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh.*" Just like the phrase in Isaiah, these words have meaning individually but it is unclear exactly what they mean together or how they should function as a name. Moses takes the mystery with him; he takes the learning to pass onto the people of Israel when they ask for God's name. Rather than dismissing God's words as incomprehensible and thinking of himself as a child incapable of understanding, Moses takes the words he may not fully understand in order to pass them down to the next generation.

When we are faced with the incomprehensible, it is tempting to push it away. It is tempting to see ourselves as incapable and even to blame those who came before us for not giving us the tools to understand. Instead, we can take the message and pass it on. We can refuse to break the chain and perhaps even the name of God will emerge eventually from what seems to us to be incoherent babbling.