



## 5 ways

to view the burning bush

Why did God choose a thornbush from which to speak to Moses? Why not a more grand and inspiring choice such as a mountain peak or the cedars of Lebanon? The answering voices of the sages in the Midrash\* are varied; e.g.:

1. Rabbi Joshua ben Karhah: 'Why a thornbush and not a carob or sycamore tree? To teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thornbush.'
2. Rabbi Eliezer: 'Just as the thornbush is the lowliest of all trees in the world, so Israel was lowly and humble in Egypt; therefore did God reveal Himself to them and redeem them.'
3. Rabbi Jose: 'Just as the thornbush is the prickliest of all trees and any bird that goes into it does not come out unscathed, so was the servitude of Egypt more grievous before God than all other servitudes...'
4. Said the Holy One Blessed be He to Moses: 'Don't you feel that I suffer anguish whenever Israel does? Know from the character of the place from which I am speaking, out of the thornbush, that I share their suffering.'
5. 'Just as it is the nature of a thornbush, that if a man thrusts his hand into it, the hand suffers no hurt because its thorns are bent downwards, but when he tries to pull his hand out, the thorns catch it...so it is with Egypt. At the beginning they welcomed Israel... But when they sought to leave, they would not let them.'

\* #1-4: Exodus Rabbah; #5: Yalkut Shimoni



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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 1:1—6:1  
*Shemot*: 'names'

## Why reflect on Torah?

Our Torah reading journey continues... As we leave Genesis and open the book of Exodus we will have an opportunity to explore those bible stories with which we are familiar (e.g., the Burning Bush, the Crossing of the Red Sea, the Ten Commandments) but which we may not have examined closely, especially in the context of the greater biblical narrative.

Take for instance the opening chapter of Exodus. After listing the names of Jacob's sons who have long since died (1:1-6), from here we notice that the enslaved Israelites are plunged into a kind of anonymity. Where the Genesis stories were woven around individual personalities like Jacob and Joseph, Exodus now refers to 'the Israelite people' as an amorphous mass. It takes a while for the new hero to emerge. First appears his parents (though unnamed, 2:1), then the presence of the child (2:2), and finally his name: *Moshe* (Moses) in 2:10.

The figure of Moses will dominate the rest of the Torah. With the help of Jewish wisdom, let's treasure this week's Torah portion which introduces Moses and the predicament of his people hundreds of years after having settled in Egypt.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 1:1–6:1

Our Torah portion opens with an account of the intense suffering of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. Even God is absent until the very end of chapter 2. And when the name of God finally does appear it is repeated in rapid succession, and in the form *God-verb*:

*And God heard their moaning...  
God remembered His covenant...  
God looked upon the Israelites,  
and God took notice* (2:24-25)

Clearly this signals a dramatic turning point. Watch out Pharaoh... God is about to act! Read what happens next in chapter 3-4 as Moses is called and sent as God's agent of liberation.

## Tasting Torah

*Moses said, 'I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses, Moses'* (Exodus 3:3-4).

Moses' encounter at the burning bush is a moment of revelation. But it doesn't happen all at once. At first it seems that Moses is fascinated by what appears to be a natural phenomenon. Drawn to it, he comes to realize that God is addressing him. Ponder this beautiful passage with a friend, seeking new insights into a familiar bible story.

## Touching Torah

Bahya ben Asher (14th century Jewish scholar, Spain) comments on this passage in terms of the journey of spiritual growth:

*The narrative underlines that Moses achieved the perception of three things: the fire, the angel and the Shechinah [the divine presence]... Since this was Moses' first experience of prophecy the Almighty wished to initiate him gradually... To what may this be compared? To a man who has been confined to a dark room...If he suddenly goes out into the sun he will be blinded. He must therefore get gradually used to the light. The same thing applies to spiritual light.*<sup>1</sup>

Does this interpretation resonate with your reading of the text? Continue to share in havrutah. [See Faith & Life at right.]

## Depthing Torah

Probing the text further, the sages ask: is the burning bush more than a 'shock tactic' used by God to attract Moses' attention? Could it be part of the divine message itself?

In the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) we find this answer:

*Moses had thought that the Egyptians might consume Israel; hence did God show him a fire which burnt but which did not consume, saying to him: 'Just as the thornbush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel.'*<sup>2</sup>

But not all commentators accept this view. Why not? Read the text: "*An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire*" (3:2). To suggest that the fire symbolizes the Israelites' oppressor contradicts this verse which associates the fire with a messenger of God. What do you think? Can you and your havrutah partner add further ideas on the significance of the burning bush? Compare your thoughts with the five midrashic ideas over the page ('Five Ways'). Savor the creativity and variety of Jewish interpretations, revealing 'the seventy faces of Torah.'

## Doing Torah

In view of this Torah portion reflect on the figure of Moses, and on your own life. Have you ever had a 'burning bush' encounter? Of the symbolism discussed, which aspect speaks most strongly to you?



## Faith & Life

The interpretation of Bahya ('Touching Torah') is especially thought-provoking when one considers that by the end of his life, Moses will be described as the prophet *par excellence*:

*'whom the Lord singled out,  
face to face'* (Deut. 34:10).

A life of profound spirituality has to start somewhere, in small seeds, with small steps, and for Moses that special intimacy with the Lord begins here, at a thornbush 'beyond the wilderness' (3:1).

Reflect on the spiritual journey of your own life. From burning bush to...?

1. Cited in Leibowitz, 52-53.  
2. Exodus Rabbah 2:6  
Bibliography. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996).  
Scripture: NJPS.