

Shemot 2021

Source Sheet by david straus

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Shemot is the 13th parashah in the annual cycle of Torah reading and the first one in the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Torah. A new pharaoh is now on the throne and the Israelites have become slaves in Egypt. The parashah then tells the story of Moses, his adoption into Pharaoh's household, his encounter with God and the burning bush, and his return to Egypt.

Exodus 1:1-21

(1) These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: (2) Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; (3) Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; (4) Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. (5) The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. (6) Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. (7) But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. (8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. (9) And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. (10) Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground." (11) So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses. (12) But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. (13) The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites (14) the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field. (15) The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, (16) saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." (17) The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. (18) So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" (19) The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." (20) And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. (21) And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O humankind, what is good, And what God requires of you: Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.

Amos 5:15, 23-24

(15) Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate..... (23) Spare Me the sound of your songs! And let Me not hear the music of your lutes! (24) But let justice well up like water and righteousness as a mighty stream.

Yalkut Shimoni**(13th-14th century)**

There are righteous convert women: Hagar, Asenath, Ziporah, Shifrah, Pua'ah, the daughter of Pharaoh, Rahab, Ruth, and Yael, the wife of Hever the Kenite.

Rashi on Exodus 1:15:2-4

(16) שפירה SHIPHRAH — This was Jochebed; she bore this additional name because she used to put the babe after its birth into good physical condition (משפירה) by the care she bestowed upon it (Sotah 11b).

(17) פועה PUAH — This was Miriam, and she bore this additional name because she used to Call aloud and speak and croon to the babe just as women do who soothe a child when it is crying (Sotah 11b).

(18) פועה has the meaning of crying aloud, as (Isaiah 42:14) “I will cry (אפעה) like a travailing woman”.

Shadal on Exodus 1:15:1**(1800-1865, Italy)**

(1) *The Hebrew midwives* - the understanding of our sages, o blessed memory, and Onkelos, and Rashbam, and Ramban and Ra"z is that those midwives were from the seed of Israel, and the understanding of the Alexandrian translator, and [Eusebius Sophronius] Hieronymos, and Yosephus Flavius, and Don Itzhak [Abrabanel] is that they were Egyptian, these midwives of the Hebrews. And this is right, since how does it make any sense that [Pharaoh] would order Jewish women to destroy all the children of their own people and believe that they won't reveal such a thing?

Sotah 11b

It was the reward of the righteous women of that generation that caused Israel to be redeemed from Egypt.

Shabbat 54b

Anyone who has the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and does not protest, he himself is apprehended for the sins of the members

of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow (USA, 1933-)

The story of Shifrah and Puah—the midwives who refused to obey Pharaoh’s order to murder Hebrew boy babies—is perhaps the first tale of nonviolent civil disobedience in world literature.

Nechama Leibowitz: “It is the attitude towards the minority, to the defenseless outsider or stranger that determines whether a particular person or group possesses the fear of God... If we accept that the midwives were Egyptian, a...very vital message becomes apparent. The Torah indicates how the individual can resist evil. He need not shirk his moral responsibility under cover of ‘superior orders.’ The text contrasts the brutal decrees of enslavement and massacre initiated by Pharaoh and supported by government and people with the godfearing ‘civil disobedience’ of the midwives. Neither moral courage not sheer wickedness are ethnically or nationally determined qualities. Moab and Ammon produced a Ruth and Naamah respectively, Egypt two righteous midwives.””

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (USA, 1929-1968)

Radio Broadcast, KPFA, Santa Rita CA, January 14, 1968

Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles. Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it. Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But, conscience asks the question, is it right?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (UK, 1948-2020)

Often the mark of real moral heroes is that they do not see themselves as moral heroes. They do what they do because that is what a human being is supposed to do. That is probably the meaning of the statement that they “feared God.” It is the Torah’s generic description of those who have a moral sense.

Exodus 2:1-4

(1) A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. (2) The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. (3) When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (4) And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

Tur HaAroch, Exodus 2:1

(1) ויילך איש מבית לוי, “A distinguished man from the house of Levi went, etc.”...The Torah did not bother to mention Amram’s name at this point, nor that of Yocheved, as **the important thing was only to report whose offspring they were. The Torah was anxious at this stage to reveal the birth of the Israelites’ saviour.**

5. Their names aren't mentioned as they weren't important. Moshe would have been born even without them as he was already ready and waiting from the 6 days of creation. Amram and Yocheved just happened to be the people that brought him into the world, but had they not, then certainly someone else would have. They aren't the reason for Moshe.

Sefer Yuhasin, Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto, (15th/16th C, Turkey)

And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi....The reason the Torah does not mention either his name or her name, is to teach us that every Jewish home has the potential of giving birth to the redeemer of Israel.

Exodus 2:11-15

(11) And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. (12) And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. (13) And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: ‘Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow?’ (14) And he said: ‘Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? thinkest thou to kill me, as thou didst kill the Egyptian?’ And Moses feared, and said: ‘Surely the thing is known.’ (15) Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well.

Seeing no one about: Not because Moses wanted to act furtively but to indicate that because there was no one to administer justice, he had to take the law into his own hands.

--Etz Chayim Commentary

He looked this way and that way: He turned to the Left and to the Right, to all the different parties and classes, seeking help from them. **And he saw that there was no man:** That there was no a single individual willing to stand by the weak; **and he slew the Egyptian and buried him in the sand:** It was then that he killed the Egyptian within his heart, divorcing himself totally from the Egyptian culture...
-R. Meir Shapira of Lublin

The murderer is compared to a betrothed maiden; just as a betrothed maiden must be saved [from dishonor] at the cost of his [her violator's] life, so in the case of a murderer, he [the victim must be saved at the cost of his [the attacker's] life. And from where do we know this of the betrothed maiden? As was taught by the School of R. Ishmael. For the School of R. Ishmael taught: [The betrothed damsel cried]; and there was none to save her, but, if there was a rescuer, he must save her by all possible means [including the death of her ravisher].

We see the moral compass in the lone story of Moses's life in Egypt, when he kills an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew (Exodus 2:11-12). Moses, an Egyptian aristocrat, sees an Egyptian persecuting a Hebrew and acts swiftly to protect the vulnerable from the oppression of the strong. The next day, he tries to break up a fight between two Hebrews, proving that his motivating drive is prevention of abuse, not parochial loyalty to the Hebrews irrespective of context. A sine qua non of leadership is a commitment to fairness with an allergy to abuse. (Aryeh Bernstein) - See more at: <http://jewschool.com/2013/12/19/31366/lessons-on-leadership-from-the-making-of-moses/#sthash.RJdaymVb.dpuf>

Pirkei Avot 2:5

(5) He would say, a brute does not fear sin, one who is ignorant cannot be devout, one who is bashful does not learn, one who is impatient cannot teach, one who engages in commerce excessively does not become wise. And in a place where there are no men [to do what is right]; strive to be that man.

Exodus 3:1-6

(1) Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (2) An angel of Adonai appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. (3) Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" (4) When Adonai saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." (5) And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. (6) I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

"Into the wilderness" can also be translated as: far away into the desert (Jerusalem Bible), to the edge of the desert (R. Aryeh Kaplan), behind the wilderness (Everett Fox), to the farthest end of the wilderness (J.H. Hertz).

What do these translations add to your understanding of where Moses is when he encounters the Burning Bush?

"Horeb" comes from the Hebrew root *chet-resh-bet*. It means waste, desolation and dryness. In this case, do you think the word refers to a physical or metaphysical place of desolation? Why?

How does this deeper understanding of the word Horeb help your understanding of where Moses is when he encounters the Burning Bush?
Why does Moses need to be in a lonely, sparse place for this encounter?

Haamek Davar (Poland, 19th cent.)

The word wilderness is necessary. It's significance is that he (Moses) endeavored to drive (the flock) to the most remote place. He was drawn to a place that was remote. It was worthwhile that he be alone to probe Divinity and the like. Because of this (the text says), "and he came to Horeb, the mountain of God". Another shepherd wouldn't come there because it was a desolate wilderness. The land was wasted, dry and vast...But he (Moses) drove the flock to the place that was the most wild where no other shepherd would be. He came to this place to be alone.

Kli Yakar (Prague, 17th Cent.)

It was necessary to state that he was a shepherd because the majority of prophets receive their prophecy while shepherding. Prophecy requires solitude. As it is written in Psalm 8. "When I behold the heavens, the work of thy fingers..." By these means, his thoughts will (be preoccupied with) the emergence of God, may God be blessed, until he is (spiritually) awakened by Heaven and the spirit of God. This won't happen if he dwells in his house or if he does work other than in the field. It only happens for the shepherd who has a lot of unoccupied time.

Shemot Rabbah 2:5

A Gentile once asked R. Joshua b. Karhah: Why did the Blessed Holy One, see fit to speak to Moses from within a thorn-bush? [R. Joshua retorted]: If it had been a carob tree or a sycamore tree, would you not have asked the same question. However to send you away you without any answer is not possible, [so] why from within a thorn-bush? To teach you that there is no empty place devoid of the Shechinah, not even a [lowly] thorn-bush. "In a flame of fire." At first only one angel descended and stood in the center of the fire as an intermediary. Only afterwards did the Shechinah descend and spoke with him from within the thorn-bush. Rabbi Eliezer said: Just as the thorn-bush is the lowliest of all trees in the world, so too Israel were lowly and downtrodden in Egypt. Therefore the Blessed Holy One revealed God's self to them and redeemed them, as it says (Exodus 3:8) "And I will go down and save them from the Egypt." Rabbi Yossi said: Just as the thorn-bush is the hardest of all the trees, and any bird that enters into it does not come out unharmed, so too the servitude in Egypt was harsher to God more than any other servitude in the world.

And why did the Blessed Holy One reveal Himself to Moses in this way? Because he [Moses] thought in his heart, saying, Maybe the Egyptians will destroy Israel. Therefore the Blessed Holy One revealed God's self in a thorn-bush that was burning but not consumed. God said to him, just as the thorn-bush is burning but is not consumed, so too the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel.

Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 14:4

(4) Another comment on why *in a flame of fire (belibbat esh)*? The fire was on both sides of the bush and in the upper portion, just as the heart (*leb*) is placed between the two sides of a man's body and in the upper portion of his body. **Why did He appear in the midst of a bush of thorns** rather than in a large tree or a column of smoke? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I have stated in the Torah: *I will be with him in trouble* (Ps. 91:15); inasmuch as they were enslaved, **I appeared in a bush of thorns, which is a place of trouble. Therefore, out of the midst of a bush which is full of thorns, I appeared unto him.**

Kedushat Levi, Exodus, Shemot 12

To prepare Moses for his sacred mission, God commanded: *Remove the shoes from upon your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground!* (Ex. 3:5) But the word **נעלים**, "shoes," has a dual meaning. The word **נעלים** is related to **נעלה דלת**, "locking up a door." Moses' shoes were a symbol of the things that had kept him "locked up" and unable to detect God's presence in the everyday world. Moses had to "unlock" himself in order to become connected with the world around him and grow into an effective leader. In this way, Moses learns that holiness can be found on earth; the burning bush was one of the "sparks" from the Most High which exists in our earthly domain.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, 19th c. Ukraine

Aryeh Bernstein, JewSchool

Fugitive Moses is tending his sheep, when an unusual thing catches his eye: "He gazed, and there was a bush, all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, 'I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?' Although the reader already knows that this is a sign from God (v. 1), Moses does not. He just thinks it's interesting. We see unusual things all the time, but how often do we pay attention to them? More often, we ignore them, explain them away, or feel too busy tending our sheep to investigate. Had Moses not been driven by a need to understand, he never would have had the chance to hear God's voice. Note the language: "When Adonai saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him" (v. 4). It is Moses's expression of intellectual curiosity that justifies calling him and giving him the job. Strategizing within the well-defined parameters of the task at hand does not cut it: one must be constantly studying the entire world; after all, the source for solving the greatest national problems might lie in an unusual, small bush.

How does Moses know he needs to be alone before he encounters the Burning Bush? Was it a conscious action on his part? Did something well up in his subconscious? Was God leading him to solitude? Did he have a spiritual practice already of seeking solitude for contemplation?

Why do you think Moses needed to be alone when he heard God's message in the Burning Bush?

When have you needed to be alone? What were "Burning Bush" moments in your life?

Not only was the location important, but Moses's profession was important. Solitude isn't just about location. It's also about time. Without sufficient time prophets wouldn't be able to hear God's voice.

Most of us wouldn't claim to be prophets, but we might need space and time to hear God's voice and understand God's direction in our lives. Where, when and how do you listen for God?

Daat Zkenim on Exodus 3:2

(1) "out of the burning bush." The reason that G-d chose this bush to reveal Himself in was that one **could not construct a deity or symbol of a deity out of the bush.**

Rashi on Exodus 3:2

(1) אש בלבת אש means IN A FLAME OF FIRE, i. e. in the very heart of (לב) the fire...(2) מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה OUT OF THE MIDST OF A BUSH (a thornbush) — and not from any other tree, in accordance with the idea (Psalms 91:15) "I will be with him in trouble" (Midrash Tanchuma, Shemot 14).

The text says, Moses 'saw, and look, the bush was burning with fire and the bush was not consumed. ' Now, this takes place in wilderness....And this wilderness Moses wanders with his sheep is huge and empty, so there is no need to put it out for fear of wider fire, just steer clear of it.

But Moses doesn't steer clear, he looks; long enough to see that the bush is not only burning, but it is not consumed. And the text says, ' And Moses thought, "Let me, pray, turn aside that I may see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up.'" This bush is clearly none of his business, out of his way, but he just has to turn aside and look at it. And that reveals something deep about the man. He is a seeker, not just a seeker after justice, but a man seeking his destiny. He is living contentedly as a shepherd, with a loving father-in-law, a wife, a son, a nice job. He could just settle. But something is driving him to turn aside, to pay attention to oddities, possibilities, omens.... And, in the manner of this manifestation, appearing as a burning bush, God is also revealed as one who appears not only in high drama, but also sets subtle signs for us. Most of God's appearances are in dramatic forms with big production values - - a pillar of fire or on a mountain top in lightning and clouds. But here, Rashi points out, God is manifest in a bush, the humblest of plants – just a lousy little bush in the wilderness ... burning. It took someone special to notice it.

Moses notices, and in that noticing ignites the engine of our entire history. How many other shepherds walked that way and either missed the bush or saw it was burning but didn't look long enough to see the miraculous in it? --Rabbi Arthur Strimling, Kolot Chayeinu

We miss a whole host of things in our day-to-day lives...So common is this phenomenon that there's a name for it: "inattentional blindness." In other words, we all have blind spots that prevent us from seeing things that should be obvious, but, because we are focused on something else, we miss. It is a fact of all our lives. The researchers...highlight what they call the most fascinating aspect of human attention. "Not that we don't notice so many things, but that we think that we DO [notice them]." "We vividly experience some aspects of our world," they write, which leads to "the erroneous belief that we process all of the detailed information around us. In essence...we are completely unaware of those aspects of our world that fall outside [our] current focus of attention." --Rabbi Michelle Robinson, Temple Emanu-El

1. Why is it significant that this encounter took place in the wilderness?
2. What qualities about Moses led him to notice the burning bush? Why might those qualities make him a good leader?
3. What conditions do we personally need in order to "notice" or be present?
4. What hinders our ability to notice or be present?
5. How can we, as a teaching community, foster a culture of noticing?

