

## Parshat Shemot (Burning Bush, Exodus 3)

### From Sinai and Zion, Jon D. Levenson

"The God of the Hebrews has chanced upon us. Please let us go a journey of three days into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to YHWH our God, lest he strike us with plague or sword." (Exod 5:3)

In other words, the deity is like his worshippers: mobile, rootless and unpredictable "I shall be where I shall be" (3.14)—nothing more definite can be said. This is a God who is free, unconfined by the boundaries that man erects. To man, especially to a political man in a civilization as urban and complex as that of Egypt, this request of the Hebrews must have seemed unspeakably primitive. And so Pharaoh, ruler of a great power, responds contemptuously to Moses and Aaron's plea that the people be allowed to journey into the desert to appease their God, lest he afflict them:

Who is this "YHWH" that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not recognize YHWH and I will not let Israel go! (Exod 5:2)

Artlessly, an opposition has been set up between service to YHWH and service to Pharaoh. Two masters, two lords, are in contention for the service of Israel in these first chapters of Exodus. As the narrative develops, it becomes clear that one master represents human pride, the security of an ancient and settled regime which has lasted for millennia and will, so its ruler believes, outlast the demand of these Asiatic barbarians for the liberty to serve their God in his desolate home. The other master is that unpredictable deity himself, unknown in the urban world of Egypt, a deity whose home and whose power lie outside Egyptian sovereignty, increasingly threatening it and continually reminding Pharaoh of the limits of his power, which he and his subjects regard as infinite and, in fact, divine. The contrast is also between the desert and the urban state. As Zev Weisman puts it, the desert serves as a cradle for this primitive universalism of social elements which are outside the control of government, in that it is a space free of any political authority whatsoever and of any organized governmental-cultic establishment." Note that I am not saying that the desert was the goal or ideal of life in ancient Israel. It was not. The desert was mostly conceived as a forbidding, even demonic area. Nor am I saying that YHWH's essential nature was perceived throughout biblical history as that of a desert deity. It was not. What I do claim is that the desert, which some poetry (which is probably early) regards as the locale of YHWH's mountain home, functions in early prose as a symbol of freedom, which stands in opposition to the massive and burdensome regime of Egypt, where state and cult are presented as colluding in the perpetuation of slavery and degradation. The mountain of God is a beacon to the slaves of Egypt, a symbol of a new kind of master and a radically different relationship of people to state. Sinai is not the final goal of the Exodus, but lying between Egypt and Canaan, it does represent YHWH's unchallengeable mastery over both.

It is possible that "Sinai" in Ps 68:9, 18 and Judg 5:5 is a gentile adjective related to the "Wilderness of Sin," a desert probably in the Sinai peninsula (e.g., Exod >> 16:1). If so, the expression refers to a broader area than the mountain itself in its designation of the divine abode. On the other hand, there is an unmistakable play on Sinai in the account in Exod 3:1-6 of the burning bush (sēnê), which Moses encountered at Horeb. The marvel that attracts Moses' attention here is a bush that burns and burns, but is never burnt up—the prototypical renewable source of energy. The document from which this narrative is drawn refers to the mountain of God not as Sinai, but as Horeb (v 1). Still, the closeness in sound of sēnê ("bush") and Sînay ("Sinai") cannot be coincidental.

Perhaps the play on words here derives from the notion that the emblem of the Sinai deity was a tree of some sort; hence the popular association of Sînay and sēnê. In fact, a blessing on the tribe of Joseph identifies

YHWH with "the one who dwells in the bush" (Deut 33:16). If "bush" is not a scribal error for "Sinai," the tree here is not merely a device to attract attention, as one might think from Exodus 3, but is, rather, an outward manifestation of divine presence. YHWH is the numen of the bush. The conjunction in Exodus 3 of bush or tree (we do not know the precise meaning of *sēnê*) and fire is not surprising in light of later YHWHistic tradition. "YHWH your God," thunders a Deuteronomistic homilist, "is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (Deut 4:24). In the encounter of Moses and the burning bush, two of YHWH's emblems-tree and fire-clash, and neither overpowers the other. The two will appear again in tandem in the *mēnorâ*, the Tabernacle candelabrum which is actually a stylized tree, complete with "branches," "almond-shaped cups," "calyces," and "petals" (Exod 25:31-39). This arborescent lampstand appears not only in the Tabernacle which served as Israel's central sanctuary in the period of wandering in the wilderness, but also in the Temple that was to be built by Solomon in the early monarchical era (1 Kgs 7:49). The Temple at Jerusalem was lit by the fires of the burning tree."

## From Moses; A Stranger Among Us, Maurice Harris

(Citing Levenson paragraph above....)

"The Torah means for us to understand that the encounter between God and human can be spectacular or private, immanent or transcendent, intimate or forbidding. For Levenson, the ancient Temples ritual lampstand, whose flame was kept lit throughout each night, was a symbol of both facets of the encounter with God. The menorah combined the divine fire upon Mount Sinai with the simple small tree (or bush) of Moses private, first direct encounter with God.

The presenting of these two images-a mountain in fiery thunder and a small tree-in the paradoxical combination of a burning bush that is not consumed relates a message to us about the nature of God's being. It's as if God is trying to say, "You can know me intimately (*panim-el-pan im*/ face to face) and I am utterly unknowable (*ehyeh-asher-ehyeh* / I will be what I will be). I am both Friend and Creator of the Universe." Rabbi Sybil Sheridan puts it this way, "Moses has a much closer relationship to God than anyone ever had, but it's still an elusive one. We understand through Moses that although we can get very, very close, God remains always beyond us. We can never define God."

"What Moses teaches us in his two contradictory encounters with God is that when it comes to the experiences and events in our lives that connect us with higher meeting, or that cause us to discover Truth, we don't need for all of it to make some kind of logical sense. So what if it doesn't all make sense? The nature of some aspects of Reality may be nonlinear, may be of a composite nature, with contradictory elements sitting alongside each other and creating a paradoxical tension that may be part of the truth of our own encounters with the Divine in our lives. *Panim el panin* and *ehyeh asher ehyeh* are invitations to us to try to stay open to the different ways the Divine manifests in our lives, and the composite artistry of Torah is an invitation for us to remember that Western linear and logically consistent storytelling is not the only way to think about the world or experience reality. We've entered a realm, to quote Alter once more, in which the subject itself is "essentially contradictory, essentially resistant to consistent linear formulation."

Their thoughts (Zohar and Marshall, *The Quantum Society*) on the insights that "quantum reality offers on the nature of truth echo the multifaceted picture of truth that the composite artistry of the Torah gives us through its presentation of different and contradictory partial truths side by side. They write, "Quantum reality shows us that there can be many points of view, or many faces of truth, some even mutually contradictory, and yet all equally real in the potential sense that all of the quantum realm has existence."2s Zohar and Marshall elaborate further, explaining how their understanding of the truth having many faces is not a simple slide into a philosophy of relativism:

it is not true that "truth" is only our relative point of view, and that one truth" is as good as any other. There are criteria. There is an underlying reality there... We are in dialogue with something. It is just that that something has many faces, many potentialities, and that the more of those faces we can know the closer we will come to being in touch with the larger underlying reality... [T]he multifaceted nature of quantum reality...call(s) upon us to accept the Partial nature of the truths to which we can have access... [These partial truths are but the obtainable faces of a deeper, underlying, though ultimately inexpressible, truth... This is a maturity that allows me to be a committed Christian or a committed Jew, a committed advocate of my own vision of the good or the true or the beautiful, while at the same time allowing me to acknowledge that my way is only one possible way.

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Torah, midrash, and contemporary philosophers like Zohar and Marshall all present us with guidance to approach the human experience of truth - or the human encounter with God - as an opportunity to recognize the partial nature of the moments of truth we discover."