

Parshah Q's – Shemot

Exodus 3 tells us the elaborate story of Mosheh Rabbeinu's initiation into prophecy via the elaborate story of the Burning Unconsumed Shrub (BUS). The very elaborateness of the story is thought-provoking – why, for example, do we need to know that Mosheh was attracted by the curious sight, let alone need a full description of his thought process? Yet “Mosheh said: I will turn aside to see this wonderful sight, (as I wonder) why the bush is not burnt up”. (Note an amazing midrash claiming that Mosheh was not open to Revelation on his employer's time, but could have his curiosity appealed to.)

Furthermore, why does Hashem choose to initiate Mosheh via a visual image, not to mention one that is never explained?

Finally, why does Hashem choose to attract Mosheh only to make him keep his distance – “Don't come closer - remove your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is sacred land”?

What follows is a non-comprehensive survey of midrashic interpretations of the symbolism of the BUS. My suggestion is that all of them should be evaluated in light of the questions above. Note here also Ibn Caspi's wonderful and revelatory general suggestion that prophets are often given prophecies that they come to understand more deeply over time, and that the Torah sometimes describes as a new revelation what is actually a maturer appreciation of an old revelation.

- 1) R. Elazar ben Arakh – G-d spoke to Mosheh from a low shrub to emphasize that He acted out of concern for justice rather than because he had the power to help his people out (Note: alternative reading: so that it would not appear that He had intimidated Mosheh into serving. This, however, does not square well with G-d's angry final response to Mosheh's attempted recusal).
- 2) R. Eliezer – G-d appeared out of a thornbush to emphasize that He too (k'b'yakhol) had been injured by the descent into Egypt
- 3) G-d appeared out of a low shrub to emphasize that He was with the Jews, then the most downtrodden of nations. The fire symbolized the Egyptians, who would fail to consume the Jews. (Note that G-d appears out of the fire, but the fire symbolizes the Egyptians.)
- 4) Just as this shrub produced both thorns and flowers, so too the Jews produce both righteous and wicked people.

I think it likely that G-d showed Mosheh what he most needed to see, and that the midrashim interpret the symbolism with this in mind. In other words:

- 1) Mosheh needed to be persuaded of the justice of the cause
- 2) Mosheh needed to be convinced that G-d was k'b'yakhol self- interested in remedying the situation
- 3) Mosheh needed to be convinced that the Jews could survive the worst Egypt could throw at them. Or, my wife's suggestion: Mosheh needed to be reminded/convinced that the Egyptian oppression was also part of G-d's plan.
- 4) Mosheh needed either to be warned that the Jews were not perfect, or to be reassured that they had worthwhile members among them. (Note: This clearly requires some treatment of the question of how Mosheh knows that Aharon is his brother.)

2 and 3 seem uninteresting, and indeed may work better if we believe that the symbolism was not actually intended for Mosheh but rather for him to relay to the people. 1 and 4, however, both point out strongly that Mosheh is not at this point an identifying Jew, as indeed Yitro's daughters see him as an “Egyptian man”. And G-d does not seek to have him identify as such, but rather to persuade him that the Jews are objectively worth redeeming.

Ibn Extra suggests that slaves could not develop the passion for justice that leads to revolutionary zeal – thus Mosheh had to be raised in Pharaoh's aristocratic (chivalrous?) court. I find this claim uncongenial – but is there another reason for G-d to specifically want an outsider as leader?