

A Taste of Torah

A commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS.

Understanding the Burning Bush

This week's parashah, Shemot, begins the saga of the enslavement of the Israelites in the land of Egypt. After waxing great and becoming a fifth column, a new pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" takes severe steps to oppress and ultimately enslave the foreign people in his land. Our hero-in-the-making, Moses, is born to a Levite family; and as a result of Pharaoh's decree to annihilate the firstborn males, he is placed in a basket in the bulrushes of the Nile. Found by the daughter of Pharaoh, Moses matures in the Egyptian palace, and one day "wanders out to his kinsfolk" and sees their burdens. Distraught and angered by the abuses of one taskmaster, Moses kills him, thinking that no one has witnessed his misdeed. Later, when Moses discovers that "the episode is known," and that Pharaoh is seeking to kill him, he flees to Midian and the wilderness of Sinai, where he encounters a burning bush. How may we understand this symbol of "the bush that is not consumed"?

Professor Ze'ev Falk offers dramatic insight into our verse. Falk writes,

Moses protests regarding his ability to take the Israelites out of Egypt. Therefore God makes a promise to him: "I will be with you and this will be the sign that I have sent you; when you take the people out you will worship God on this very mountain" (Exodus 3:12). What is this sign and how does it prove to Moses that he will succeed? It appears that the sign is the burning bush that is not consumed. This suggests that in their exodus from Egypt, they will worship God in this place. The burning bush symbolizes the altar where the fire continually burns and is never extinguished. It is as if at this point they have already begun to worship their God at Sinai. This sign strengthens the spirit of Moses, as he knew that Israel would be in the service of the King of kings . . . The idea that "they are My servants" and not servants of servants appears here for the first time – as if to say, they are no longer under the rule of Pharaoh. But this sign is only understood after their departure from Egypt and until then, the possibility that Moses will fail exists . . . This comes to teach us the need for patience and trust in God. (*Divrei Torah Ad Tumam*, 120)

What is the wisdom behind Professor Falk's reading of the burning bush? According to Falk, Moses already senses that freedom from Egypt is not simply about personal liberation. Rather, the endeavor speaks to a larger, national mission of serving God. Already they are acknowledged to be God's servants—and not merely the slaves of Pharaoh. Such a promise and aspiration is what encourages Moses in his mission. Yet, as Falk acknowledges, the symbol of the bush is not entirely understood until after the Exodus. Only when the Israelites reach Sinai will the sign, the narrative, and Israelite destiny become clearer. The challenge in our own lives is to recognize our own "burning bush" moments: when a sign appears, we must have the patience and faith to embrace it, understand it, and be inspired by it. Such signs have the potential of liberating us from modern "bonds of Egypt."

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

This week's commentary was written by Marc Gary, executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

What's Jewish about Jewish Leadership?

A few years back, I was sitting in a class for prospective leaders of the Jewish community and yawning. Although the class was organized by a prestigious Jewish institution and gathered together an invitation-only group of accomplished men and women from business and the professions, I kept looking at my watch and planning my escape. The problem was not the company; it was the content. Like me, the others present were responsible in their daily lives for managing teams of hundreds of employees with multimillion-dollar budgets. Now we were being lectured about vision statements, strategic plans, metrics, collaborative environments, and the other multitude of concepts that I and the others present had not only long ago absorbed, but utilized everyday in our work. I tuned out, and left immediately after the session, grabbing some great kosher deli on the way out and wondering what our tradition has to add to a generic discussion of leadership.

"Jewish leadership" is one of the most used and abused phrases in contemporary life. An entire cottage industry has arisen to train and educate professional and lay leaders for the Jewish community. The Jewish Theological Seminary, the beloved institution where I work and learn, is part of that industry with its tagline "Learning, Leadership, Vision." Yet, we should all pause—advocates and skeptics alike—to consider the question: What, if anything, is truly distinctive about Jewish leadership?

This week's parashah, Shemot, suggests at least a partial answer. In chapter 3, God commands Moses to assemble the elders of Israel and tell them, "'I will take you out of the misery of Egypt . . . to a land flowing with milk and honey.' They will listen to you" (Exod. 3:16–18). Moses, however, has his doubts. He responds, "*What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?*" (Exod. 4:1; emphasis added). God then demonstrates three miracles that Moses can invoke to convince any doubters that "the Lord . . . did appear to you" (Exod. 4:5). The first and third miraculous signs are well known, because Moses in fact uses them in Egypt to demonstrate that he is truly God's emissary: the transformation of his rod into a snake and the Nile's water into blood. It is the second demonstrated miracle, however, that raises the most profound questions:

The Lord said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! And He said, “Put your hand back into your bosom”— He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body. (Exod. 4:6–7)

Unlike the other two miracles, Moses does not repeat this demonstration of God’s power in Egypt. More startling, this skin affliction *tsara’at* (often mistranslated as “leprosy” even though it bears no resemblance to Hansen’s disease) is usually seen by the Rabbis of the Talmud and the Midrash as a divine punishment for misbehavior—specifically, slander. In Numbers 12:1–16, for example, Miriam is afflicted with the same skin disease for slandering Moses in connection with his marriage to a Cushite woman. Rabbi Akiva believed that both Aaron and Miriam suffered the same fate (BT Shabbat 97a), and the Midrash makes that point explicitly: “For we have found that in the case of Aaron and Miriam who spoke slanderously of Moses that punishment [of *tsara’at*] overtook them” (Sifra, Metzora 5:7). Another midrashic source cites the case of Gehazi, Elisha’s servant (2 Kings 5:20–27): “Plagues afflict those who speak slander, as we have seen in the case of Gehazi who spoke slanderously of his master and leprosy clung to him until the day he died” (Avot D’Rabbi Natan, version A, chapter 9). According to Resh Lakish, the biblical verse Leviticus 14:2, “this shall be the law of the leper [*metzora*],” should be interpreted as “this shall be the law of one who slanders [*motzi shem ra*; literally, one who brings out an evil name]” (Arachim 15b; Tanhuma, Metzora 1).

Did Moses commit slander? The great modern Bible scholar Umberto Cassuto thought not. To the contrary, Cassuto sees Moses’s willingness to subject himself to this normally incurable disease as demonstrating his courage and readiness to endure whatever is necessary for the fulfillment of his mission (*A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 47). Certainly, those are important attributes for a leader.

But Rashi holds a darker view. He suggests that God inflicted Moses with the dreaded disease, even if only for a short while, because he had committed the terrible sin of slander. Indeed, Rashi ties this miracle to the previous one—turning the rod into a snake—noting that Moses “had made the serpent’s occupation (slander) his own.”

Whom did Moses slander? According to Rashi, he slandered his own people, the Children of Israel, for suggesting that they would not believe in his mission. Moses had no faith that the people would have faith. Knowing full well their inadequacies and character flaws, he simply did not believe that they could overcome their environment, even with his divinely supported leadership. They had sunk too low.

Rashi’s commentary comes to teach us a harsh truth about Jewish leadership: it requires faith in one’s community. This is no small matter. Communities by their nature tend to disappoint.

They can be weighed down by inertia and resistant to change. They sometimes sink to the level of their lowest common denominator, rather than accept the challenge to reach higher. They are often comprised of individuals who prefer to follow the beat of their own drums and not collaborate to form a harmonious symphony. At times, they can be downright unpleasant. It has been observed that Moses loved the Jewish people (Ahavat Yisrael), but he didn’t like them very much. I’m sure that Jewish communal leaders sometimes feel the same way.

But this week’s parashah tells Jewish leaders that they need to stop complaining about the perceived defects and deficiencies of their communities, and have more faith that—properly inspired and led—those communities can achieve new heights. In the aftermath of the Pew Research Center report, we have seen articles and blogs from putative academic, professional, and lay leaders who seek to justify why they left Conservative Judaism and their Conservative communities behind. Some cite a lack of ritual observance in their communities, or a lack of commitment to halakhah, or a dearth of community members steeped in traditional Jewish texts. But the message of Parashat Shemot is that Jewish communities, with all their shortcomings, are sacred, and that true Jewish leaders never leave them behind. They only lead them forward.

According to the Talmud, when God afflicts Moses with *tsara’at* for losing faith in the community, God rebukes him by saying, “They are believers, the children of believers” (BT Shabbat 97a). Leadership of a sacred community is different from leadership of a business or a political party. A Jewish leader must recognize that his or her leadership takes place within the context of a divine calling and the people’s response to that calling. The response may be imperfect, but it demands respect and not disparagement. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expressed this thought beautifully: “Who is a leader? To this, the Jewish answer is, one who identifies with his or her people, mindful of their faults, to be sure, but convinced also of their potential greatness and their preciousness in the sight of God” (*Covenant & Conversation: Exodus*, 33).

Without faith in one’s community and the community’s capacity to respond to a sacred calling, there is no “Jewish” in Jewish leadership.

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