

(שמות ג ב-ד)

וַיֵּרָא מִלֶּאֱלֹהִים אֵלָיו בְּלִבְת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֵּעֵר בְּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינּוּ אֵכָל:
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמִּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה: וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי סָר
לִרְאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

The Torah records Moses' spectacular introduction to Gd. He was intrigued by the seemingly miraculous event of the burning bush that would not be consumed. A bush in the dry desert is extremely flammable and should have been consumed almost immediately. Yet this bush remained intact and continued to burn. He had to see this miracle for himself.

When he approached the bush, he was surprised to hear the voice of the angel of Gd telling him to prepare himself properly before he approaches. This was not a show to enjoy. He was about to enter into a serious conversation and be charged with a specific and important mission. The Torah records Moses' reluctance to accept the mission. Among his arguments, he mentioned that the people will not listen to him. They will not believe that Gd sent him to redeem them. Gd provides Moses with a sign:

(שמות ג יא-יב)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנִכִּי כִי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פְּרַעְה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר
כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה־לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִכִּי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאָךְ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה:

What sign does Gd give Moses? When the people depart Egypt, they will worship Me on this very mountain. Moses has difficulty understanding this sign. Where is the miracle to be found in simply worshipping Gd on this mountain? What spectacular aspect of this worship will grab the attention of the people? At this point in his relationship with Gd, Moses still needs the extraordinary, supernatural event to impress him. A burning bush is a reasonable start. How will he convince the people that he has been sent to redeem them by waiting for some future, seemingly mundane event to occur?

Instead, Moses asks Gd for a sign to bring to the people. The Jewish people won't give me the time of day if I come bearing a promise of worshipping Gd. Gd, give me something miraculous that I can demonstrate for them that will capture their imagination and get them to believe in me. Almost reluctantly, Gd gives Moses the signs of his staff turning into a snake, the water turning to blood and his hand suddenly infected with and subsequently healed from leprosy. Even armed with all these miracles, it took seven days for Gd to convince Moses to undertake this mission. Where was the disconnect between Moses and Gd?

Moses' introduction to Gd was very different than that of the Patriarchs. Abraham found Gd on his own, by observing nature and realizing the greatness behind it and how it

could only come about by the hand of Gd. He did not need miraculous events like a burning bush to convince him of Gd's existence or to believe in His promises. He fully accepted Gd's promise to grant him children as plentiful as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand on the beaches. He did not ask Gd for a sign. His total belief in Gd was noted and he was rewarded for it.

(It is interesting to note that at the end of Parashat Shmot, when Moses complained to Gd about not having immediately rescued the Jewish People, Gd mentioned that Abraham did not doubt Him as Moses doubted Him. Rashi brings the example of Abraham's reaction to the promise of children. He omits the story of the initial covenant with Abraham regarding the Land of Israel. ברית בין הבתרים, where Abraham asked Gd for a sign that he would indeed inherit the land. Chazal tell us that the 400 year servitude of the Jewish People in Egypt, indeed the exile we find ourselves in today, were a punishment for that request for a sign. Abraham should have had complete faith that Gd would grant his children the land. Hence Rashi is very specific in quoting the faith Abraham had regarding children and he omits the story of the covenant regarding the land.)

Moses on the other hand grew up in Pharaoh's palace. He spent minimal time with his brethren and while he empathized with their suffering, he was still somewhat disconnected from their pain, hopes and prayers for redemption. He could not fathom how a people under such duress would put their faith in a seemingly mundane promise to serve Gd on some mountain after they leave Egypt. He thought they would only respond to a spectacular sign and event. Gd explained to him that the people anticipated the sign given to them by their forebears, Jacob and Joseph. They were waiting anxiously for the simple formula, פקד יפקוד, that Gd remembered them and was ready to take them out of Egypt. Gd told Moses that he did not understand their longing. Where you, Moses, look for the spectacular, the Jewish People look for a mundane phrase given them hundreds of years before and that will be sufficient for them.

The sign Gd gave to Moses of the people worshipping Him on Mount Sinai was viewed as mundane in comparison to the flashy miracles Moses performed in Egypt and at the Reed Sea, or in giving them manna or even water from a stone. Gd told Moses at the beginning of his mission, that he is missing the forest for the trees, in focusing on supernatural events. Isn't the greatest miracle to found in the taking of a motley group of slaves who were at the forty ninth level of defilement and in 7 short weeks transform them into a nation that reached the forty ninth level of purity? Where just a few weeks earlier he led a group of 600,000 separate individuals, at Sinai he forged them into a single group with a single purpose, to worship Gd as one man with one heart, כאיש אחד בלב אחד. It was a subtle miracle instead of awe striking. But if one appreciates it, there can be no greater miracle than that.

At various incidents in the desert, Moses repeated the pattern of looking for the spectacular instead of the mundane. In two different incidents when the people needed water, he hit the rock even though he was told the second time to speak to it. He looks at the promise to feed the people meat for 30 days in Parashat Bhaalotcha as a seemingly impossible miracle. Moses seemed to prioritize the spectacular over the mundane. Ultimately it prevented him from entering the Promised Land. As Rashi quotes the Midrash at the end of Parashat Shmot, Gd told him that he, Moses, would see what Gd does to Pharaoh and the exodus from Egypt, but he will not merit to enter the land or see the victory and conquest of the 31 kings and the Land of Israel. It took a while for Moses to realize his mistake. He ultimately understood that he wanted to enter the land in order to perform the simple Mitzvot associated with the agricultural cycle, to partake of the natural beauty of the land and the seemingly mundane miracles of Gd looking after His land and His people, that these were more important than the spectacular, nature-defying miracles he originally prioritized. Unfortunately for him and for us, by the time he came to this realization, he lost the opportunity to attain his most fervent wish, to enter the Holy Land.

Copyright 2022, Rabbi Joshua Rapps. All rights reserved. Permission granted to print for individual use. Inclusion in and/or distribution via printed or electronic media is prohibited without permission of the author.