

PARASHAS SHEMOS

Anatomy of a Fire

The scene has always fascinated thinkers, artists and people from every walk of life. Moses stands in the distance looking up in awe at the mountaintop where a bush is burning vigorously - without being consumed! Suddenly, the voice of Hashem speaks to him from amidst this wondrous spectacle, commanding him to remove his shoes and come nearer. This is the setting in which Moses is appointed as the divine messenger to go down to Egypt and lead the Jewish people to freedom.

But why did Hashem choose to communicate through such a spectacular manifestation as an indestructible burning bush? Why didn't He address Moses directly as He would any other prophet? And why did He command Moses to remove his shoes before coming near?

The commentators explain that, although he had fled Egypt many years before, Moses never forgot the plight of his unfortunate Jewish brothers and sisters in Egyptian bondage. Even as he lived in the relative serenity of Midian, he could find no peace. His mind was filled with images of Jews struggling under heavy burdens of bricks and cement, suffering the tonguelashes and whiplashes of their Egyptian taskmasters. What would happen to the Jewish people? How long would they have to suffer such terrible agonies? These questions gave Moses no rest. He himself may have been in Midian, but his heart was enslaved with his people amidst the bricks and mortar of Egypt.

Hashem provided the answers to his questions in the most vivid form through the metaphor of the burning bush. The bush sitting alone atop a mountain in the wilderness symbolized the Jewish people trapped in the desperate desolation of exile and enslavement, stripped of their physical freedom and their spiritual greatness. The fire symbolized the terrible suffering of the Jewish people. But fire is an ambivalent thing. It is a destroyer, but it can also give warmth and light. A fire is raging inside this bush, Hashem was telling Moses, but there is another aspect to this fire which you cannot see. The Divine Presence resides within this very fire. The terrible ordeal which this fire represents will not destroy the Jewish people. On the contrary, it is a crucible which will forge them into a great people, and cement an everlasting bond between Myself and them, My chosen people. It will make them strong spiritually, and it will lead on the golden path of their destiny to the Giving of the Torah.

But why was it so difficult for Moses to view the suffering and afflictions of exile as an indispensable stage in Hashem's master plan?

The answer to this question, the commentators explain, was implicit in Hashem's command that Moses remove his shoes. Shoes empower and inhibit us at the same time. They help us walk on all types of terrain, but in order to accomplish this, they prevent the toes from exercising their sense of touch. The physical aspect of a person has a similar effect on him. It allows his soul to function in the physical world, but in doing so, it obscures his spiritual perception. The exile might seem inexplicable to Moses because he was "wearing his shoes," so to speak, because he was viewing it through the eyes of a mortal. "Remove your shoes!" Hashem commanded him. Transcend your physical existence! Look with the spiritual eyes of the pure soul! Behold, the burning bush is not consumed!

The promise symbolized by the burning bush - that the loving hands of Hashem are always there under the raging currents of our history - has been our consolation for thousands of years. Even in the best of times, we are in need of that consolation. Even as we enjoy prosperity and status in the Diaspora, our holy Temple, the glorious crown jewel of our nation, still lies in ruins, and our people are dispersed to the far corners of the earth. Even as we enjoy an uneasy respite in this seemingly endless exile, we still suffer physical persecution and spiritual deprivation. But if we look past our "shoes," we, too, will sense the Divine Presence among us. We, too, will discern the light that shines even in the densest darkness.