



Torah Reflections on Parshat *Shemot* Exodus 1:1 – 6:1

January 9, 2010 23 Tevet 5770

You get up one day. You get dressed. You eat breakfast. You do all the other normal activities that are part of your morning ritual. Then you head outside on your usual route. Then...wait...something is different. You didn't notice it before. What is it? What does it mean?

This is what happened to Moses in this week's parashah, *Shemot*. He tends his sheep, as he does every day, walking through the wilderness where he lives. He has perhaps walked this route dozens of times. Yet on one particular day he looks, sees – notices actually – a startling phenomenon – a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. How long has this bush been burning? Is this fire new or has it been burning for days or weeks? Has Moses frequently passed by it before and not seen or noticed it?

Once Moses does acknowledge this unusual spectacle, the text tells us that Moses said – (or thought) to himself: "I will now turn aside and see this great sight." (Exodus 3:3) What does he mean when he says he will turn aside to see the sight? If he sees the sight, is he not facing it?

Jewish tradition offers a few answers to this problem. The Midrash *Me'am Lo'ez* says maybe this means that Moses needed to accustom himself to seeing the intensity, like accustoming one's eyes to the sun after being in a darkened room. He might have needed to muster courage to look at the bush. A sight like this was not part of his previous experience, his worldview had been shaken. He needed to gather his inner strength to continue to look at the troubling vision. The medieval commentator, *Alshich*, believes that "turning aside" refers to Moses' turning his attention, or moving his focus. Moses sees the mundane, the physical, but understands that he must look deeper to begin to understand and investigate the spiritual, the mystical. The "Burning Bush" is where Moses has his first direct encounter with God. He notices the bush, sees its unusual characteristics, then in deepening awareness begins his relationship with God.

So it is for us whenever we face a life-changing and frightening event like illness, loss or suffering. We wake up one day and find that our life has shifted, there is a new reality. How do we get through the challenges and emotions of our new reality? How do we adapt to knowing and living with something that is unexpected?

Like Moses gradually adjusting his vision and intellect to adapt to the experience of the burning bush, we need to adapt to this new intensity in our lives and see with new eyes. Slowly, deliberately, we can let the light in, and begin to find healing and hope. One may hope for a something as large as a cure. Or one may hope to experience a blessing today. Maybe it is the blessing of seeing something familiar in a new way: noticing the radiant color of a tulip that is beginning to blossom from the depths of moist soil, or the friendly smile of a stranger. We put a new meaning on what we see – the flower is more than a plant, it is a vision of beauty. The smile is the message of a greeting from another created in the image of God. These are blessings we have the gift of experiencing.

We need to "turn aside" to notice the blessings while experiencing what is vastly troubling. All this takes awareness, determination and focus. Like Moses, we notice that something is not the

way it should be. He investigates to see what it is. We try to analyze what loss and suffering means. Then we let it settle into our being, slowly adapting to the newness. And so we can begin to find the healing within.

After seeing the burning bush, the sign that presages a dramatic change in his life, Moses moves forward into the new contours of his life as a prophet, as God's messenger. He does not take on this new reality easily. He has tremendous misgivings and fears, he loudly protests to God numerous times, but ultimately he makes the shift and moves forward into his new truth. With God's support he will live out his future.

If we find today is not what we expected, if it is challenging in startling ways, we are like Moses who saw a strange and frightening sight. We too can be like Moses by turning aside to see in deeper ways, finding the divine in the moment. As we take the time to accustom ourselves to the intensity we find the capacity to approach with a new attitude. We seek meaning and appropriate hope. We come to know that we have the ability to find support on our journey through the internal resources of our souls, the collective support of friends, family, acquaintances, community and possibly even strangers. And as God sees us turning aside to look deeper, we may glimpse God along with us on the journey of healing.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Mimi Weisel, a trained chaplain and educator of other rabbis in the skills of pastoral care. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

