



From the Burning Bush to Sinai

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The Book of Shemot is drawing to a close. Our *parashah*, Parashat Ki Tissa, offers one lens through which to see the book: the transition from the revelation of the burning bush to the revelation of the giving of the Torah, from the *sneh* to *Sinai*. This lens is in fact a prism, which holds a number of dimensions. In the following lines I will focus on transition regarding vision (Moshe's transition from averting his eye to requesting to see more) and transition regarding presence (from a lack of faith in God's presence to presence as testimony of love).

Our parashah offers one lens through which to see the book: the transition from the revelation of the burning bush to the revelation of the giving of the Torah.

Seeing at the Burning Bush

Moshe was shepherding his father-in-law Yitro's sheep when he saw the burning bush. He does understand that there is "a great apparition" (Shemot 3:3) before him, but he doesn't understand its nature, he doesn't understand the meaning of the apparition. God explains to him how to

behave: "Take off your shoes," and also why: "For the place upon which you are standing

is holy ground” (v. 5). Moshe reacts: “Moshe hid his face because he was afraid to gaze at God” (v. 6). In contrast to Moshe who is afraid to look and shies away from the apparition, for God looking and seeing at this moment serve an extremely important function. Seemingly, they motivate God, encourage God to put Godself forward and represent God’s coming closer. Seeing is a critical component of moving God to go down to Egypt, listen to Israel and acknowledge their pain:

שמות ג:ז-ח

וַיֹּאמֶר ה', רָאָה רָאִיתִי אֶת-עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם; וְאֶת-צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו, כִּי יִדְעָתִי
"אֶת-מַכָּאֲבָיו : וְאֶרְדּוּ לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם, וְלִהְיוֹתָם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא, אֶל-אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה

Shemot 3:7-8

God said, I have indeed seen the suffering of my people who are in Egypt. And I have heard their cries at the hands of their taskmasters, for I know their pain. And I will descend to save them from the power of Egypt and raise them up from that land, to a land that is good and expansive.

Seeing is the point of origin for this encounter between God and the people of Israel.

The Experience of the Burning Bush

At the encounter of the Burning Bush, Moshe expresses over and over his lack of faith in himself and his doubts as to his ability to succeed in the task that God is placing upon him: “Who am I to go...” (v. 11). God’s answer to this question is simple: “For I will be with you” (v. 12). God promises Moshe to be an accompanying presence, and presents Himself as present, available, and existent. This is God’s reaction to Moshe’s lack of faith, and it is also a reassurance about Israel’s reaction to Moshe’s message. Moshe presents a basic question: What should he do if the people push back, “and they say to me—what is His name; what should I say to them?” (v. 13). God’s answer is cryptic: “I am that I am... I am

has sent me to you” (v. 14). However, despite the mysteriousness in the answer, what is recognizable in the response is a declaration of presence and being.

Moshe represents those who might cast doubt on God’s existence, and he places words of doubt in the mouths of Israel and Pharaoh. However, he also states that this abstract existence of God is not sufficient:

שמות ד:א

"וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר, וְהֵן לֹא-יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי, וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי: כִּי יֹאמְרוּ, לֹא-נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ ה'."

Shemot 4:1

Moshe responded and said, “They won’t listen to me and they won’t heed my voice. For they will say, ‘God has not appeared to you.’”

Perhaps, just as seeing is what moved God to ally Himself with Israel, so too perhaps Israel need a vision in order to move them to ally themselves with God.

Similarly, when God attempts to calm Moshe’s fears about being heavy of tongue and heavy of speech He both offers Moshe help and emphasizes that He will be with Moshe:

שמות ד:יא-יב

"מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם אוֹ מִי יֵשׁוּם אֶלֶם אוֹ חֲרָשׁ אוֹ פֶקֶח אוֹ עוֹר הֲלֹא אֲנוּכִי ה': וְעַתָּה לֵךְ וְאֲנוּכִי אֱהִיָּה
"עִם פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר"

Shemot 4:11-12

Who gives a man a mouth and who makes one dumb or deaf or seeing or blind, is it not me?! And now I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you in how to speak.

Yet Moshe’s concerns are not assuaged. He is not even assured by God’s promise to be

present and accompany him, he doesn't feel capable in the face of this challenge, and responds to God with the pained, "send who you will send" (v. 13).

From the *Sneh* to Sinai

Thus we leave the *sneh*, with Moshe's hesitation of seeing God and an all round doubt regarding God's presence. But things have changed. Though, Moshe is again a shepherd, he has traded his father-in-law's

At the burning bush, God sees the suffering of the people. At Mt. Sinai God sees the people's rebellion.

flocks for God's sheep, the people of Israel. Sinai is, of course, the place that cements and represents the bond between God and people, but it is also the place of Israel's great betrayal of their God: the sin of the Golden Calf. In this context, just as he did at the burning bush, the *sneh*, Moshe finds himself receiving an explanation from God of the reality that he is about to encounter: "Go and descend for your nation has ruined" (32:7). However, there are a number of significant differences between God's exchange with Moshe at the burning bush and their conversation at Mt. Sinai. In their first encounter, Moshe assumes that *Benei Yisrael* will not believe in him and God reassures him that they will. At Mt. Sinai, the dynamic is reversed. God knows that the people are not believing, are not faithful, and Moshe finds himself in the position of arguing in the defense of Israel, arguing that God should not abandon His people. At the burning bush, God sees the suffering of the people and that moves Him to save them. At Mt. Sinai God sees the people's rebellion, and that inclines God to want to put more distance between Himself and His people.

But the act of seeing receives new meaning during the atonement process.

From a Fear to Gaze to a Request to See

The sin of the Golden Calf is the background for a conversation about the love between God and Moshe and between God and His people. This love is described through seeing, seeing the good in the other, a subjective seeing of the positive, the finding of favor: “God said to Moshe, I will also do this that you spoke about for you have found favor in my eyes...” (33:17). Moshe, who already saw the burning bush, God’s strong arm, and God’s great anger, Moshe who was heavy-lipped and heavy-tongued, is now relying on this intimate finding of favor and takes one more step forward in his close relationship with God and asks: “Show me your glory” (v. 18). And God responds positively: “...I will remove my palm and you will see” (v. 23).

Mutual Existence

In the middle of God and Moshe’s dealing with the sin of the Golden Calf and its aftermath, the narrative moves to the placement of the Tent of Meeting (which is possibly an early iteration of the *mishkan*): “Moshe would take the tent and pitch it outside of the camp and anyone who wanted to seek God would go out to the Tent of Meeting that was outside the camp” (33:7). Initially, it appears that this act of Moshe’s, taking the *mishkan* out of the camp is an act of distancing the Holy. However, in the description of the function of the *mishkan* after this move it appears that it has just the opposite effect, it becomes a locus of those who seek God. Israel is no longer a congregation that expresses a lack of faith and loyalty, rather it is full of people who seek God, who are looking for Him and His presence.

Not only this, but Moshe says that the connection between God and His people is dependent on God’s presence, contingent on His accompanying of them. Thus presence is a mutual quality of the relationship between God and Israel, not only are Israel seeking God but God is constantly accompanying them. “How will it be known that I have indeed found favor in your eyes, I and your people?” Moses asks, and answers, “Is it not through your

walking with us? And thus we, I and your people, will be distinct from all other peoples on the face of the earth” (v. 16).

If so, what had been the riddle of God’s existence has transformed itself into a clear symbol of the uniqueness of God’s love His people. We, Moshe explains, will know that You love us, that You favor us, when You walk with us.

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Moshe is saying that God’s initial guarantee at the burning bush of “I will be with you” is not sufficient, neither for the faith of the people, nor for his own. However now, after the post-sin reconciliation, God’s presence, his journeying with the people, is testimony not only to the fulfillment of His

promise, but also to His love. His mere presence is testimony of his love.

One can understand the meaning of this change in light of the sin of the golden calf. God’s statement regarding his presence after the sin demonstrates and testifies a choice of togetherness that is dynamic, a unity that is kept through and despite movement and change and even in light of sin and separation.

From the *Sneh* and Beyond Sinai

Significant shifts take place during this joint journey from the *sneh* and beyond Sinai, changes in the evolving relationship between people and God. They are compelled by a longing for mutuality:

At the *sneh*, God presented himself as one who sees suffering and is moved by it, but at Sinai

Moshe asks not only to be seen but also to see God. In addition, at the *sneh*, Israel are presented as filled with doubt and God presents himself enigmatically as “I am that I am,” but at Sinai, after the sin of the golden calf, Israel are presented as those who seek God’s presence, and the relationship between God and Israel is described using divine presence, God is described as the one who goes with Israel. This presence is more mutual and less enigmatic.

These shifts foretell a new connection between God and Israel: one of a subjective love. Seeing and presence join to reveal that at this post—sin moment Moshe and Israel are liked, favored by God.

May we merit seeing that encourages presence and enhances favor—our favor in the eyes of others and theirs in ours.