

**Shmot: The Heart of the Flame in the Burning Bush**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet January 10, 2026 21 Tevet 5786**

God's first encounter with Moses begins with these verses:

**וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוּ כִּהְיוּ מִדְבָּר וַיִּנְהַג אֶת הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל הַר הָאֱלֹהִים תְּרַבֵּה. וַיֵּרָא מִלֹּאֲדָהּ אֵלָיו בְּלֶבֶת אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֹעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינָנו אֹכֵל. (שְׁמ׳ ג:א-ב)**

**Now Moses was shepherding the flock of Yitro his father-in-law priest of Midian. He led the flock beyond the grazing area and came to the mountain of God to Horev. And God's angel was seen by him in the flame of fire in the midst of the bush. He saw: now here the bush is burning with fire but the bush is not consumed! (Exod. 3:1-2)**

This scene transfixes us. We have to read and re-read these verses very closely in order to create a mental picture of what is happening. **First, when does this take place?** Recall that Moses is currently living in exile in Midian. He was spared the drowning death of all the Hebrew males when Pharaoh's daughter rescued him from the Nile and adopted him as her son. He knows that he is different from the rest of the household. Perhaps he even knows that he is a Hebrew. When he goes out one day to observe **his brothers** (Exod. 2:11) and witness their suffering, he witnesses one of them being brutalized by an Egyptian taskmaster. He risks his life to defend his kinsman, a Hebrew slave, and accidentally killed the Egyptian taskmaster. The next day when he tries to intervene in another altercation between two Hebrews he discovers that his manslaughter is known (2:13-14). This exposes him to the possibility that he will be executed by Pharaoh as a punishment<sup>1</sup> so he flees from Egypt and takes asylum in Midian. When he tries to prevent the harassment of Yitro's seven daughters at the well in Midian, he finds refuge in Yitro's home and is quickly married off to Yitro's daughter, Tziphora. Pharaoh dies. Presumably this news reaches Midian. In the Egyptian context, Pharaoh's death occasions a great cosmic reset. But would it have meant an automatic amnesty for Moses? Very possibly. Moses could actually now return to Egypt without fear of retribution for the death of the taskmaster. Moses is at a clear junction in his life. **Where does the story of the Burning Bush take place?**

<sup>1</sup>We rarely acknowledge that Pharaoh is in a double bind: Pharaoh is Moses' father. But as the sovereign of Egypt, he is also the ultimate "father" to all of his subjects. As the avenging parent, he would be obliged to seek retribution for the dead taskmaster. Moses realizes that for Pharaoh that obligation takes precedence over his "parental" role, therefore, he decides to flee.

<sup>2</sup>Following Rabbi David Kimhi and biblical botanist Noga Hareuveni, **מִדְבָּר** ought to be properly translated as **grazing area**, as opposed to **wilderness** or **wasteland**.

<sup>3</sup>In Highland Park NJ, we do not have a mountain as part of our visual landscape. But for people who live say, in the Hudson Valley or near the Berkshires or the Adirondacks,

With Moses at a liminal (boundary) moment in his life, it should not surprise us that Moses takes the flock to a liminal place, a boundary. That is precisely what **אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר** **ahar hamidbar**<sup>2</sup> **beyond the grazing area** is. Just as Moses is about to cross a geographical boundary (the "grass-line" between grazeable and ungrazeable terrain) he is also about to cross his own personal biographical bound-



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ary: the line between guilt and amnesty, exile and return, service to his family and service to his people. For the forty years he has been in Midian the mountain has loomed large in the backdrop. It is part of his geographical and spiritual landscape. It would have captivated his imagination.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one day he will go there. Besides, the text refers to it as the **Mountain of God**. Why wouldn't he want to explore it a little? His appearance at this place and at this time marks the convergence of all of the trajectories of his life. It is when he is at the edge of the grazing area, by himself, with the Mountain of God beckoning him to come closer, that he will gain some insight into himself. Perhaps his destiny will be revealed to him. And it is just then that he sees a bush on fire. **Is it just an ordinary bush or The Bush?** Read the verse closely. **הַסִּנֵּה - The Bush occurs no less than three times!** That means that **this** bush was no ordinary bush. If we are correct that Moses has seen this mountain on many other shepherd outings, he would have seen this bush as well.<sup>4</sup> Is it a tall bush? Or a small bush? Is

mountains exert a strong presence. Visitors to Beacon NY will always imagine seeing the river from the top of Mount Beacon. In New Paltz you can see the top of the Mohonk Mountain, part of the iconic Shawagunk Ridge. If ordinary people such as us are captivated by mountains, perhaps it is not farfetched to imagine that someone as extraordinary as Moses would have been captivated by them as well.

<sup>4</sup>There are plenty of examples of heroic, mythological or folkloric figures traveling to the end of the world to visit a tree. The idea that Moses would have seen The Bush and associated meaning with it on a previous occasion therefore, is not farfetched. In America people visit mythic and historic trees all the time. The Mercer Tree in Princeton

it wide or narrow? Is it off alone by itself or in a clump of similar bushes? All that is left to our imaginations. But given the Torah's very strong anti-pagan bent, (sacred trees are a strong feature in ancient pagan mythology) it is not an accident that the Torah, amplified by the midrash, conjures this bush as anything but majestic. In the Jewish imagination, it is quite simply, a lowly thorn bush.<sup>5</sup> An angel appears to Moses from fire in the bush. **But where is the Fire?** The Hebrew reads: **אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה** - *belabat esh mitokh hasneh*. This is a bit of a puzzle. **לבֶּבֶת** - *labat* is an unusual word that occurs only here. Many commentators associate it with **לֵהבָה** - *lehava-flame* and the verb **לִבֶּה** - *to fan a flame*. Others say it derives from **לֵב** - *lev-heart*. This gives rise to some fascinating midrash.

**בְּלַבֵּת אֵשׁ, לִלְבְּבוֹ כְּשִׁיבּוֹא לִסְנֵי וַיֵּרָאָה אוֹתָם אֲשׁוֹת וְלֹא יִירָא מֵהֶם.**  
*In a flame [belabat] of fire – to give him courage [lelabevo], (lit. to fan the flames inside him) so that when he arrives at Sinai and sees those fires (when the Mountain is on fire at the moment God gives him the Ten Commandments), he will not fear them.* (Shmot Rabbah 2:5)

Ah. So the Burning Bush episode is actually a foreshadowing of the revelation that will take place later on Mount Sinai (Exod. 20). God is preparing Moses spiritually for a greater moment to come, adjuring him to be strong and have courage, be fully present and "on fire", to be at the maximum of his capabilities at the moment God will reveal himself to the world. But then we have this interpretation:

**דָּבָר אַחֵר, בְּלַבֵּת אֵשׁ, מִשְׁנֵי חֲלָקִיו שֶׁל סֵנֶה וְלִמְעַלָּה, כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהֵלֵב נִתְּנוּ מִשְׁנֵי חֲלָקִיו שֶׁל אָדָם וְלִמְעַלָּה.**  
*Alternatively, belabat esh, from two thirds of the bush and above, just as the heart [lev] is placed at two thirds of the person and above (the top third of the bush).*

This is fascinating. This prompts Rashi to say that Moses sees the vision of the angel in the **heart of the fire**, **לִבּוֹ שֶׁל אֵשׁ**. Others go further and present an image of the heart of the fire in the heart of the bush, which would be truly miraculous because one would expect a bush fire to erupt at the edges, namely on the branches and twigs, rather than at the thicker center which is usually much more resistant to fire. **Bush fires always start at the extremities not the heart. But the fire of this miraculous bush exists in the heart of the bush not at the extremities!** Now that we are totally in the realm of the imagination, let us take the audacious leap to closely examine the second part of this midrash where it describes the fire being located in the **top third** of the bush, that is, **the heart of the bush**. We don't usually think of dividing our bodies into three equal zones. However, if we were to think of our bodies that way, the heart would be located in the upper third of the body.

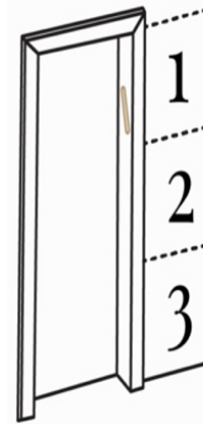


Coincidentally, there is an item that is found in every Jewish home that is located precisely in the top third of a space, namely the doorway. I am referring specifically to the mezuzah. Since yesterday (20 Tevet 5786) was the 821st yearzeit of the great Maimonides (1138-1204) let

us honor him by quoting his great code, the Mishneh Torah:

**וְהֵיכָן קוֹבְעִים אֶת הַמְּזוּזָה? בְּתוֹךְ חֲלָל שֶׁל פֶּתַח בִּשְׁפָח הַסְמוּךְ לַחוּץ בְּתַחֲלַת שְׁלִישׁ הָעֲלִיּוֹן שֶׁל גִּבֵּה הַשַּׁעַר. רַמְבַּ"ם מְשַׁנֵּה תוֹרָה הֵל תְּפִילִין וּמְזוּזָה וְיָיב**  
**Where is the mezuzah affixed? At the inside of the entrance, within a handbreadth of the outer edge of the doorpost, at the beginning of the top third of the entrance.** (Hilkhot Tfillin u-Mezuzah 6:12)

There is of course a practical reason why the mezuzah should be affixed at the top third of a standard entrance: it will be roughly at heart-level, and you are more likely to connect to it with your heart as you enter. But this midrash allows us



to make an even more audacious leap which resonates with a deep spiritual sensibility.

**Every Jewish doorway is a hint of the Burning Bush. We symbolize Sinai in the synagogue. When we go up to the Bimah and take the Torah out of the Ark we are making a symbolic reenactment of the Sinai Revelation. We symbolize the Sneh in the home. If the "heart of the flame" of the Burning Bush is located in the top third of the Bush, just like the heart is in the top third of a body; and if a mezuzah is to be located on the top third of a doorpost - then every time we enter a Jewish home, we ought to be directing our hearts to recall God's original encounter with Moses at the Burning Bush. And that is the heart of the flame and the heart of the matter.**

SHABBAT SHALOM

## REMEMBERING RAN GVILI THE LAST HOSTAGE WHOSE REMAINS ARE IN GAZA

dates back to the Revolutionary War (the one there now is a descendant of the original, which fell in 2000). The Salem Oak (Salem NJ) is where the Lenape met the colonial settlers. The Emancipation Oak (Hampton, VA), is where enslaved people learned to read and write. The various trees at Gettysburg PA are "witness trees" to the Battle.

<sup>5</sup> The classic source for this is Shmot Rabbah 2:5: **מִן הַסֵּנֶה עוֹשֶׂה קוֹצִין וְעוֹשֶׂה רֹדִין**, just as the bush produces thorns and roses, so too, in Israel there are both righteous and wicked. There are plenty of other interpretations there.