**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #12:**

**The Burning Bush (2):**

**Moses Discovers God**

And God called to him from within the bush, and He said “Moses Moses,” and [Moses] said, “Here I am.” (*Shemot* 3:4)

While the book of Shemot has used names sparingly thus far, God’s initial call to Moses suggests a sharp pivot. By duplicating Moses’ name, God hints that He intends to restore names, to create a society of people with identity, of people who see one another. This is not the first time that God addresses a biblical figure by doubling his name, nor is it the last. Tinged by both affection and urgency,[[1]](#footnote-1) God calls on Abraham (“Abraham, Abraham” – *Bereishit* 22:11) not to harm his son and reassures Jacob (“Jacob, Jacob” – *Bereishit* 46:2) not to be dismayed by his journey down to Egypt.[[2]](#footnote-2) Later, God will also initiate communication with Samuel in this manner (“Samuel, Samuel” – I *Shmuel* 3:10). However, Masoretic tradition distinguishes God’s call to Moses from the others by removing the *pesik*, the line that usually appears between the names and produces a slight pause (represented above with a comma). The absence of this line between Moses’ names (“Moses Moses”) may connote a special urgency, or, alternatively, a seamless overflow of divine communication, which washes over Moses continuously.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moses’ one-word response (*hineini*) is a typical response to this call, suggesting a willingness to accept God’s mission – though Moses will soon, unexpectedly, refuse.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Holiness of Space (*Kedushat* *Ha-makom*)**

And [God] said, “Do not draw near. Remove your shoes from your feet, for the place that you are standing upon is hallowed ground.” (*Shemot* 3:5)

God introduces here the notion of holiness of space, cautioning Moses not to draw too close, and furthermore, to remove his shoes, because he stands on hallowed ground (*admat* *kodesh*).[[5]](#footnote-5) While Jacob had already recognized the idea of an awesome (*nora*) place that bears God’s presence (*Bereishit* 28:17), he did not use the word *kodesh*, meaning sacred. The concept of sacred space prepares Moses to construct the Tabernacle (the precursor to the Temple), which will introduce holy space into the camp and into the everyday life of the nation. It also anticipates the ultimate aim of God’s commission of Moses, which is to bring Israel into the holy land of Israel (*Shemot* 3:8).[[6]](#footnote-6) One can hardly miss the connection between this passage and the one that describes Joshua’s experience upon entering Israel and encountering its hallowed ground:[[7]](#footnote-7)

And it was, when Joshua was in Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, a man standing opposite him… And he said… “I am the officer of God’s army… Remove your shoe from your foot, for this place that you are standing upon is hallowed.” (*Yehoshua* 5:13-15)

**Moses and God: The First Encounter**

Moses will reach the pinnacle of spiritual heights; he becomes the benchmark for the outer limits of what a human can achieve in a relationship with God.[[8]](#footnote-8) Tellingly, Moses’ first encounter with God illustrates the complexities involved in approaching the divine. Moses initially draws forward, eager to observe “this great sight.” In response, God sharply curbs Moses’ enthusiasm (“Do not draw near!”), warning him against proximity that oversteps the boundaries.[[9]](#footnote-9) Contact with holiness obligates a person to express respect and limit hubris; this seems to be why God instructs Moses to remove his shoes.[[10]](#footnote-10) Moses does not respond to God’s initial instructions, and the following verse opens a new statement by God (introduced with a new *va-yomer*,“And He said,” although no one else spoke in the interim):[[11]](#footnote-11)

And He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob!” (*Shemot* 3:6)

Only now, following God’s self-introduction, does Moses comprehend that he stands in God’s presence. Yet instead of surging forward to seek God, Moses hides his face, “frightened to look at God.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Moses’ gesture of withdrawal is not without its detractors. The verb used to describe Moses hiding his face (*va-yaster*) suggests a deliberate withdrawal from a relationship, akin to God’s decision to hide His face from Israel when they sin (*Devarim* 31:17-18).[[13]](#footnote-13)

A Rabbinic argument revolves around this weighty moment, questioning whether Moses displayed appropriate reverence for God or whether he ought to have sought the sort of intimacy – a face-to-face encounter – that will eventually become a hallmark of his relationship with God (*Shemot* 33:11; *Devarim* 34:10):[[14]](#footnote-14)

R. Yehoshua ben Karcha and R. Hoshaya. One of them said: “Moses did not act properly when he hid his face. Had he not hidden his face, God would have revealed to Moses what is above and what is below, what was and what will be. In the end, [Moses] requested to see [God], as it says (*Shemot* 33:18): ‘Show me Your glory.’ But God said to Moses, “I already came to show you, and you **hid** your face! Now I say to you that no man shall see Me and live [*Shemot* 33:20]! When I desired [that you should seek My face], you did not desire.’”

But R. Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of R. Levi: “Even so, He **did** show him. As a reward for [*Shemot* 3:6], ‘And Moses hid his face,’ God spoke to Moses face to face (*Shemot* 33:11)! As a reward for [*Shemot* 3:6], ‘He was afraid,’ ‘[The nation] was afraid of approaching [Moses]’ (*Shemot* 34:30)! And as a reward for [*Shemot* 3:6], ‘From looking (*habit*) upon [God],’ [Moses] sees (*yabit*) the image of God” (*Bamidbar* 12:8).

R. Hoshaya said: “Moses acted properly when he hid his face. God said, ‘I came to show you My face and you treated Me with reverence and hid your face. [Therefore,] I swear that you will later be with Me on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, without eating or drinking. And you will derive benefit from the radiance of the divine presence, as it says (*Shemot* 34:29), ‘And Moses did not know that the skin of his face glowed with rays of light.’” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 3:1)

This argument also appears in *Berakhot* 7a, within the context of Moses’ bid – sometimes fruitful and sometimes elusive – to understand God’s ways. The debate over Moses hiding his face remains unresolved. Both opinions contain some measure of truth, reflecting the abiding tension between the laudable desire for closeness and the necessity of distance that defines the relationship between humans and God.[[15]](#footnote-15) More to the point, all opinions on this subject are moot. Neither R. Yehoshua ben Karcha nor R. Hoshaya can actually know whether Moses acted appropriately or not. Moses himself cannot be certain! The unresolvable nature of the debate is its very point. Any human who dares to approach God – even Moses – must live with the uncertainty that attends that act.

**Two Related Encounters: The Burning Bush and Har Sinai**

This encounter at the burning bush on Horeb anticipates the theophany that Moses will experience in the very same location following the Exodus. Mount Sinai is another name for Mount Horeb (see *Devarim* 4:10, 15; 5:2); in fact, Horeb may have received the name Sinai because of the episode of the burning bush (the *seneh*).[[16]](#footnote-16) On Mount Sinai, Moses will again witness an unusual sight: a blazing fire that seems to consume (also, like the burning bush, termed a *mar’eh*),[[17]](#footnote-17) which he boldly approaches to receive God’s instructions (*Shemot* 24:17-18). Nachmanides notes the similarity between these episodes:

“For the place that you are standing upon is hallowed ground.” Even though [Moses] was far from the bush, [God] cautioned him thus, because the entire mountain was sanctified when the divine presence descended upon it, *just as during the giving of the Torah*. And Moses was on the mountain, for he ascended there, as it says, “And he came to the mountain of God, to Horeb” (*Shemot* 3:1). And the bush was at the top of the mountain. (Nachmanides, *Shemot* 3:5)

A *midrash* suggests that this entire encounter with the bush is preparatory in nature, to ensure that Moses will not fear the divine fire at the top of Mount Sinai:

“In a flame of fire.” In the midst [of the fire.] So that when [Moses] comes to Sinai and sees the flames, he will not be frightened of them. (*Shemot* *Rabba* 2:5)

Moses will indeed ascend the mountain with confidence, in spite of the consuming fire at its apex. I would suggest that in this complex dynamic, Moses is meant to learn two opposing lessons simultaneously. Moses learns not just to approach the divine fire without excessive fear, but also to pay due reverence to it, keeping a respectful distance and proceeding with caution.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Nachmanides explains that these two incidents (the burning bush and the receiving of the Torah) do not present identical portraits of Moses’ relationship with God. Rather, they represent the continuum of a spiritual journey, illustrating the development of Moses’ spiritual character and his growing closeness to God:

“Do not come close.” [Moses] had not **yet** reached his great stature in prophecy, for at Mount Sinai he approaches the thick cloud where God was (*Shemot* 20:18). And similarly, regarding [Moses] hiding his face, for he had not **yet** risen to what will be said of him, “He sees the image of God” (*Bamidbar* 12:8). (Nachmanides *Shemot* 3:5)

At the same time, Moses’ encounter with the burning bush does not bear significance solely for his own personal encounters with God. It also foreshadows Israel’s experience at Mount Sinai, preparing Moses to effectively guide the nation through this numinous event. Like Moses, Israel experiences a theophany at Sinai, a face-to-face encounter (*Devarim* 5:4). God reveals Himself to Israel in fire; the word *aish* (fire) appears seven times in the portrayal of the theophany at Mount Sinai in *Devarim* chapter 5.[[19]](#footnote-19) God speaks with His nation “from within” the fire (*mitokh* *ha-aish* – *Devarim* 5:4, 21,23), just as He spoke to Moses “from within” the bush (*mitokh* *ha-seneh* – *Shemot* 3:4). In a remarkable linguistic parallel to the description of the burning bush (*ha-seneh* *bo’air* *ba-aish*), the mountain is also described – three times – as a mountain that blazes with fire (*ve-hahar bo’air* *ba-aish*).[[20]](#footnote-20)

Like Moses at the bush, Israel’s initial enthusiasm seems evident, as they eagerly draw close to the fiery mountain (*Devarim* 4:11). In *Shemot* 19, God instructs Moses to limit the nation from climbing up the mountain or even touching it while God speaks (*Shemot* 19:12); the necessity of imposing limits indicates the nation’s excitement and desire to draw close.

Nevertheless, the nation’s enthusiasm wanes once God utters the Ten Commandments (which, like God’s call to Moses in 3:6, are launched with God’s self-introduction). The people are terribly frightened by the fire and by the prospect of encountering God (like Moses at the burning bush), and they beg Moses to serve as a buffer between them and God:[[21]](#footnote-21)

And when you heard the voice from within the darkness, [amidst] the mountain blazing with fire. And you approached – all of the heads of your tribes and your elders – and you said, “Behold, God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from within the fire. Today we have seen that God can speak with a human and [he can] live. But now, why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we continue to hear the voice of God more, we shall die. For what human can hear the voice of the living God speaking from within the fire, as we have, and live? Draw near and hear all of the things that God will say to you, and then you will tell us everything that God has spoken, and we will hear and obey.” (*Devarim* 5:20-23)

Instead of drawing close, the nation agitatedly withdraws, moving to stand far from the mountain (*Shemot* 20:15, 18). Israel’s experience mirrors Moses’ experience in a myriad of ways, as may be seen in the numerous parallels, both linguistic and thematic, between the events. In both, initial excitement is followed by fear, and particularly, the dread of encountering God.[[22]](#footnote-22) God’s appearance in a blazing fire contributes to the fear, which appears to be an appropriate response to a numinous encounter.

**Conclusion**

Moses’ encounter with God at the bush sets the stage for all further human contact with the divine. It is a lesson in humility and human limitations, but also in the bold proposition that humans can encounter God “face to face.” All experiences of this sort involve a complex dialectic of forward and backward movements, pursuit of a careful balance between awe and love, between hesitation and eagerness. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, this proposition represents the great gift\mission of the Bible, offering humans the possibility of testing those limits, in a bid to push ever closer in our spiritual quest. Moses eventually speaks “face to face” with God, as part of an ongoing relationship that enables him to attain spiritual greatness. Even more extraordinary is the fact that all of Israel experiences this “face-to-face” relationship at Sinai, democratizing Moses’ spiritual experience and offering a glimpse of the outer limits of human spiritual attainments.

1. *Shemot Rabba* 2:6 explains that the doubling of the name is “language of affection, language of urgency.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. God’s call to Moses especially recalls His call to Jacob. Following Jacob’s requisite response (*hineini*, “I am here”), God introduces Himself as the God of Jacob’s fathers (*Bereishit* 46:2), similar to *Shemot* 3:6. God appears to Jacob as he is on his way down to Egypt with his family, on the cusp of God’s withdrawal from the story; God’s appearance to Jacob is the final divine revelation for many years, until the present one at the burning bush. This revelation to Moses confirms God’s promise to Jacob on his way down to Egypt, that He will one day extract Jacob’s descendants from Egypt. See *Shemot Rabba* 3:3, which notes this connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Both of these explanations are raised by *Shemot Rabba* 2:6. The *midrash* first compares God’s call to Moses to someone carrying a heavy load, who calls urgently to another to help him lift it. The *midrash* then offers an alternative explanation, that while generally there is a point at which God ceases speaking with a prophet, His call to Moses has no pause, reflecting the fact that Moses receives prophecy throughout his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Samuel answers *hineini* every time God calls him by name inI *Samuel* 3 (although he believes it is Eli calling him). When God doubles Samuel’s name (in I *Samuel* 3:10), Samuel answers, per Eli’s instructions: “Speak, for Your servant is listening.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is only the second time that this important word, *kodesh* (sanctity) has appeared in the Bible. *Bereishit* 2:3 introduced temporal holiness, appearing there as a verb: “And God blessed the seventh day and He sanctified it.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Zekharia* 2:16 later refers to the land of Israel as *admat kodesh*. This phrase appears only in these two places in Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There are many parallels between the careers of Moses and Joshua, illustrating how Joshua functions as Moses’ successor. See *Midrash* *Tanchuma* (Warsaw) *Tetzave* 9, which uses the similarity cited above as a starting point for its long list of parallels between these leaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Devarim* 34:10: “And there was no other prophet who arose in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Shemot Rabba* 2:7 uses linguistic evidence to posit that with the words “Do not draw near,” God informs Moses that he will receive neither the dynastic priesthood nor the kingship. According to this, from the very beginning, limits are placed on Moses’ leadership, which is not meant to be dynastic. Moses is in fact a one-generational leader, whose unique capabilities are necessary to liberate Israel, give them the Torah, and help them navigate the difficult transition from enslavement to freedom. This may stem from the danger in transmitting Moses’ unique power from one generation to the next, which could easily slide into tyranny. In any case, the fact that this *midrash* presents Moses as a one-generational leader from the outset suggests that it is not a punishment for anything that Moses does but is part of the original divine plan. Other biblical interpreters disagree, explaining that Moses was in fact slated to receive the priesthood but loses it when he resists his mission (see, e.g., Rashi, *Shemot* 4:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There is a range of opinions as to why one must remove one’s shoes at a holy site (a requirement that will also apply in the Temple; see *Berakhot* 9:5 and *Shemot* *Rabba* 2:6). Possibly, removing dusty shoes is simply a sign of respect. Baring one’s feet may moreover suggest a posture of humility and powerlessness. Ralbag suggests that Moses must remove his shoes in order to have direct contact with the hallowed ground. Others (Abravanel, Netziv) posit that this symbolizes Moses’ removal of materialism in preparation for his encounter with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Often in Tanakh an utterance receives a new introductory *va-yomer* (“and he said”) even though nothing interrupted the speaker’s previous words (see, e.g., *Bereishit* 15:5; *Yirmiyahu* 37:17; *Ruth* 2:20; *Esther* 7:5). This “*va-yomer*, *va-yomer*” phenomenon is noted often in Rabbinic sources (e.g., *Tanchuma Emor* 3; *Megilla* 16a; *Eikha Rabba* 1:40). See the list compiled by Meir Shiloach in his article “*Va-yomer…Va-yomer*” (*Sefer* *Korngreen: Studies in Tanakh Research*, A. Weiser, B. Z. Luria (eds.), 1964) pp. 362-378 [Hebrew]. Generally, this phenomenon indicates that there is a pause between statements or perhaps that some non-verbal gesture marks the space between the two statements (see, for example, Abravanel and Rav David Zvi Hoffman’s respective explanations of this phenomenon in *Bereishit* 37:21-22). In our case, the two statements may indicate that God gives Moses the opportunity to respond or perhaps to remove his shoes. If these things did occur, the text does not see fit to inform us of that. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Elijah will display a similar instinct; when he realizes that he is in God’s presence (also as he stands on Mount Horeb), he too will cover his face (I *Melakhim* 19:13). This is hardly coincidental; Elijah consciously mirrors Moses throughout that episode. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While God often describes hiding His face (*sater*) from humans, this is the only case in Tanakh in which a human hides his face from God using the word *sater*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. At the peak of Moses’ relationship with God, Moses covers his radiant face once he understands that it has frightened the people. He uncovers it only when he speaks to God and then when he transmits God’s word to the nation (see *Shemot* 34:30-35). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This, as noted previously, is aptly expressed by using the motif of fire to represent God. Similarly, humans must strike a balance between the complementary – but also dichotomous – notions of love of God and awe of God (see, e.g., Rambam, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2). God’s immanence is encapsulated in the liturgical reference to God as Father (*Avinu*), followed immediately by a reference to the transcendent King (*Malkeinu*). Or, as expressed in another liturgical poem said on Rosh Hashana, we approach God possibly as children (in a posture of intimacy) and possibly as servants (in a posture of restraint). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibn Ezra (*Shemot* 3:1) explains thus, noting the linguistic connection between *seneh* and Sinai. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Compare *Shemot* 3:3, where Moses goes to see “this great sight (*ha-mar’eh*)” – namely, a fire that does not consume the bush – and *Shemot* 24:17, which describes Sinai as follows: “And the sight (*u-mar’eh*) of the glory of God, a consuming fire at the top of the mountain.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As noted in the previous *shiur*, the *Zohar* explains that in *Shemot* 24:18, Moses could only ascend to the top of Mount Sinai encased in a cloud, which protected him from the fire that enveloped the mountain (*Zohar* II (*Shemot*) *Vayakhel*, 197a). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See also *Shemot* 19:18 and *Devarim* 4:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Compare the description of the burning bush in *Shemot* 3:2 to the threefold description of the burning mountain in *Devarim* 4:11; 5:20; 9:15. This exact phrase appears only in these two contexts in Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. An intriguing difference between Moses and the nation is that while Moses was frightened to “see” God (*Shemot* 3:6), the nation expresses fear of “hearing” God (*Devarim* 5:22-23). In fact, *Devarim* 4:12, 15 explicitly reiterates that the people saw no likeness of God at Sinai. See also *Shemot* 20:16, although the previous verse (20:15) does suggest that they are frightened by what they see and not just by what they hear. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. While the nation is not required to take off their shoes, Moses does “sanctify” them in some unspecified way, followed by the laundering of their clothes (*Shemot* 19:10). Ibn Ezra suggests that they must wash themselves, while Nachmanides adds that they must also avoid all impurities. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)