

## Signs of the Times

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L'Zecher Nishmas Yosef ben Tzemach Heftter z"l (63<sup>rd</sup> Yahrzeit)

When Moshe, the Prince of Egypt and now the shepherd in Midian, encounters the burning bush in this week's Parsha, he is really blown away. As a shepherd, he was used to understanding how natural processes work. Animals give birth, they feed, they compete, they die, and he understood all that. It was a profession of skills and he had developed the skills he needed to be a good shepherd.

Encountering the unnatural event of the *sneh*/bush on the side of Har Sinai must have really shaken him. For the first time in his life, he is seeing something that he can't explain. He is naturally curious and says to himself, records the Torah, "I gotta check this out, the bush isn't being consumed".

So when Moshe draws near to the bush, he is met by HaShem who commands him to keep his distance, explaining that the bush site is sacred ground. Then, HaShem launches into a detailed explanation of the promise that HaShem had made to Moshe's ancestors, the situation in which Am Yisrael now finds themselves, and HaShem's plan to now redeem them from *Avdus*/servitude and bring them to the Promised Land.

Moshe the shepherd absorbs this charge and, rather than saying, "Sure, I'll go, Of course, thanks for providing me with this wonderful opportunity" says – "Who am I that I should go to Pharoah and free the people from *Mitzrayim*?"

HaShem tells him – "don't worry, I'll be with you every step of the way and the "SIGN" that this mission will be successful is beneath your feet right now – the nation will receive my Torah on this very hill after you and I free them from bondage." So, this SIGN is meant to promise Moshe that, just as God attracted Moshe to his special place now to help him understand the secret of the Jew's survival in Egypt, so also will God bring him back to this very place in the future.

Moshe presses on with HaShem – who shall I tell the Jews sent me? God answers – *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. OK. And, if that doesn't work, tell them that the God who accompanied Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov (each in their own way) is the same God that has returned to redeem the nation.

So this could have been enough – but it wasn't. HaShem previews to Moshe what will happen when Moshe tries to fulfill his mission. Pharoah won't listen and HaShem will have to employ a strong hand to lead the people out of *Mitzrayim*.

Responds Moshe, the shepherd, "but the people won't have faith in my ability to do this". HaShem asks Moshe – "what do you have in your hand" and Moshe replies – a staff (after all I'm a shepherd). HaShem asks him to throw the staff on the ground and, incredibly, it transforms into a snake. Wow, Moshe jumps backwards in fear. HaShem persuades him to hold the snake by the tail and, miraculously, the snake stiffens back up to his trusty shepherd staff. HaShem tells Moshe – "if you need to prove to the Jewish leadership and the people that you are The One, use this SIGN.

Then, HaShem continues – "and if that is not enough to prove your position to the Jews, here's one more". Put your hand (use the other hand because if you drop the staff, you might get the snake back again...) underneath your shirt onto your chest and then take it back out." Moshe complies and sees that his hand, when he removes it from his chest, is now whitish, with the pallor of dead skin. Without explanation, HaShem instructs Moshe to put his hand back under his shirt and take it back out and, as you already know, the skin returns to its normal, dark tone. Now that should be a good SIGN to show the people.

But HaShem continues and says – "You know, the people still may not believe you after both SIGNS, so I have a third one for you. Fill your palm with some water from the Nile River and drop it on the ground. The water will turn to blood. That's an interesting SIGN. And, more intriguing, HaShem does not provide a return path for the blood to transform back to water – once Moshe drops it on the ground and it transitions, that's it. It's blood forever.

Then Moshe pleads with HaShem not to send him on the mission using the logic that he is not such a good public speaker. HaShem tells him that Moshe's brother, Aharon, will be his spokesperson. There's more to say about Moshe the shepherd becoming Moshe the leader, but I want to focus on the three SIGNS that HaShem shows Moshe. What do they mean and what can we learn from them in our lives?

Asks the Slonimer Rebbe, Rav Sholom Noach Barzavsky, zt"l, in his sefer *Nesivos Shalom*, is there some kind of hierarchy in the SIGNs? What's with the "if they don't believe you after this SIGN, then show them this one, and on-and-on"?

And why do the first two *osos*/signs revert to their original form while the third, as we observed, does not?

He answers that these *osos* are a continuation of the *sneh* event. Moshe intuited in the symbolism of the *sneh* and the surrounding fire that the Jewish people, in servitude and without a strong spiritual foundation, were in existential danger. Nevertheless, in the same way that the bush stayed upright in the encircling flames, the people seemed to be able to keep a firm footing in their faith. Moshe needed to know – how were they able to do this? So HaShem teaches Moshe a lesson at the *Sneh* – He tells him to remove his shoes, that the ground there is sacred – the secret to the eternal existence of the Jewish people is God's caring for us and never losing hope in us. *Ki Chelek HaShem Amo* (for the people who are a part of HaShem). If

the Jew has God supporting them, they can overcome anything. This gave Moshe hope that redemption could happen.

We can distinguish two types of wooden rods, the *Makel* and the *Mateh*. They are opposites of each other. A *Makel* symbolizes aggression, violence, and destruction – it injures people. A *Mateh*, on the other hand, symbolizes what is positive and constructive. A *Mateh* supports you – you can safely lean on it, so you won't fall.

When HaShem asks Moshe – what is in your hand – Moshe answers – a *Mateh* – a symbol of hope, strength, and rebuilding. When HaShem asks Moshe to drop the *Mateh* to the ground, the *Mateh* becomes a snake – the snake symbolizing the essence of evil and destruction. When the *Mateh*, symbolizing our *kesher* with the divine, our reliance and our leaning into HaShem, is allowed to devolve to materialism and *hevley ha-olam hazeh*, it becomes the *nachash*, the essence of evil and distance from HaShem. Nevertheless, that can be turned around. The *nachash* becomes the *Mateh* again, symbolizing the process of Teshuva by which a tortured people returned to their spiritual source and that, in every generation, repeats the process of sometimes drifting from HaShem and then having the *zchus* to return.

So the people see this *mateh-nachash* transformation and say – OK, that's a piece of wood after all, not anything live. This SIGN is not so impressive.

HaShem tells Moshe to put his hand (a living piece of himself) onto his chest and remove it. After the Jewish people had sunk to such low levels of spirituality in *Mitzrayim* that they might have been considered as "dead" to Judaism, then just like the dead-looking skin can be revitalized, so can the souls of Jews who want to return to HaShem also be reborn. There is always a path back.

So, it's not that HaShem had to perform these two *osos* to Moshe to convince Moshe that HaShem was before Him, but that Moshe's display of these two SIGNs showed the people, nearly out of hope to ever be saved or savable, that there was a path back – that there is always a path back.

So where does the 3<sup>rd</sup> SIGN fit in? The *Nesivos Shalom* asks – why didn't the Jewish people believe that they could merit a redemption? They thought that their situation was hopeless – that the power of *Mitzrayim* was too overwhelming.

However, HaShem overturns the power of *Mitzrayim*, convincingly and overwhelmingly. The Nile was a power in Egypt to which the people prayed – it was one of their gods. The Nile sustained them; it was indispensable to their survival.

The transformation of the water that Moshe drops onto the ground to blood and stays undrinkable and of no value to the Egyptians convinces the Jewish people that HaShem's power is absolute. The Jewish people now know that, no matter what attempts are made (at that time and any time in history) to destroy the Jewish people, those enemies will be vanquished and the Jewish people will live on.

Moshe the shepherd is catapulted by Jewish history to a position of leadership but only with the constant support of his family, namely Aharon, and the Elders of Israel. He becomes Rabbeynu over his lifetime – when he returns to the “Spot of the Sign”, when he climbs past the bush on the side of Har Sinai, reaches higher, and receives the Torah for us. HaShem teaches him the Torah, its great principles, and its details for informing everyday life. Moshe then carries it back to the people and starts a tradition that continues to this day.

Yosef ben Tzemach, a Jew from Lithuania, arrived in this country in the latter years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a refugee. He settled in the Lower East side tenements and worked seven days a week collecting cardboard and reselling the pieces to stores while carrying his wares on his back. He had the merit to raise, together with his wife Sara, three children, all of whom had fantastically strong Jewish identities. Three children, who, even in the face of unimaginable odds to remain authentically Jewish in pre-Depression America, during the Depression, and WWII, were able to maintain our *Masorah* and kept the light of Judaism burning bright in their homes (*hayu ohr b'moshvosam*). The youngest child was my father, Tzemach ben Yosef, a”h.

Judaism supported the Heftor family of the 1900s, just like the *Mateh* that Moshe used every day.

My grandfather’s children lived Judaism every day, seeing it as alive and enervating, just like the *Os* of the hand coming to life.

My grandfather’s children lived to see the destruction of the enemies of the Jews in their lifetime and the celebration of our people returning to *Eretz Yisrael*, just like the *Os* of the water that symbolized the power of our enemies being overwhelmed by the power of our Jewish faith.

May my grandfather have an *aliyas neshama* and may the lessons of the *Nesivos Shalom* on how to understand these three *Osos* in our Parsha reverberate through our lives in the days and years to come.