



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Pesach

By Deena Grant
Karen Miller, Editor

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and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
of Torah. Through these mailings we would like to
increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

The Eternal Flame

By Deena Grant¹

The burning bush has always been a powerful image to readers of the Bible. It marks the beginning of Moses' initiation process, and culminates in the Exodus, where the Israelites are freed from their Egyptian servitude. Besides the miracle of the bush being ablaze yet not consumed, this scene in Exodus 3 is also significant because it is the first time God communicates with Moses. The mode of communication is unique. Throughout Genesis, and up until Exodus 3, God communicates his intentions to individuals exclusively through speech.² In Exodus 3, however, God speaks to Moses through the medium of fire. What is the significance of God's speech being channeled through fire?

Throughout the Bible God's speech to human beings is accompanied by fire. Two particular instances wherein the fire of God materializes are the Gideon and Elijah narratives. These narratives serve as particularly good comparisons to Exodus 3 because both of these stories focus on doubting God.

In Judges 6 the Israelite nation is criticized for doing evil in the eyes of God by worshipping the Ammonite gods (6:1, 10). Israel cries out to God, not in repentance, but rather "on account of the Midianites" (6:7) who threaten them militarily. Despite their turning to God, Israel's belief in God is not absolute. Immediately following God's condemnation of this polytheistic worship we are introduced to Gideon, who is visited by an angel of God. The angel tells him that he is about to be appointed as judge of the Israelites. Gideon's interaction with this angel is strikingly similar to Moses' confrontation with the angel who appears in the burning bush. Just as Moses had been hiding from Pharaoh and was in the midst of his work – tending the sheep – when he "chanced" upon God, Gideon too was hiding and busy with his work – in the threshing floor – when he "chanced" upon the angel under the tree.³ A second similarity between the two narratives is the expression of doubt on the part of both Moses and Gideon. Moses expresses doubts of his own as well as anticipated doubts of the people. Following God's revelation to Moses that he has been chosen to save the people, Moses exclaims, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11) Moses then anticipates the Israelites' doubts, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" (Exodus 4:1) Similarly, when Gideon is told of his own commission to save the nation, he too expresses doubts, both that God will save the nation, and that he could achieve such a feat. "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this befallen us? And where are all His wonderful deeds which our fathers recounted to us... How can I deliver Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." (Judges 6:13-15)

One other significant similarity between the Gideon and Moses narratives is that in both cases signs are requested from God to assuage these leaders doubts. Gideon doubts the authenticity of his commission and requests a sign to prove God's presence, "show me a sign that it is You who speaks with me." (Judges 6:17) God provides a devouring fire as the sign: "Fire sprang up from the rock" and consumed the offering (Judges 6:21). The angel then vanishes along with the fire. Only after the fire appears is Gideon convinced that God has spoken and consequently that the commission is authentic, "Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the Lord." (Judges 6:22) Thus, in a time when belief in God is waning among the Israelites, and when Gideon, God's appointed messenger, doubts as well, God kindles fire in order to dissolve all of this doubt. Interestingly, once the fire has van-

ished and Gideon believes that God has in fact appeared to him, God continues to instruct Gideon, but without the fire. Once Gideon's belief is assured God no longer feels the need to provide fire alongside spoken instructions. In the Moses narrative three signs are provided. Moses requests signs to assuage the Israelites' doubts about God. In response, God provides two magical tricks at the end of the narrative, as signs to convince the Israelites of God's presence. (A stick turns into a snake and Moses' hand is afflicted with leprosy and then immediately healed). The first sign however, occurs earlier in the story and relates to Moses own doubts regarding God's good judgment in choosing him as the savior. God responds, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you" (Ex 3:12). Even though Moses' doubt is over his own appropriateness, this Divine answer, that the sign is to reassure Moses of God's presence, reveals to us Moses' unstated doubts regarding the authenticity of God's involvement altogether. Surprisingly, the nature of the sign, the manner in which God will demonstrate his presence to Moses, is left unstated. A look at another biblical narrative may shed light on what this sign actually was.

The second biblical narrative in which fire plays a crucial role is in 1 Kings 18. The Israelites in this story are practicing polytheism and have been worshipping another god, Baal, alongside their worship of God. In reaction to this Elijah the prophet demands that the Israelites choose which God they will worship exclusively. He cries, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." (1 Kings 18:21). He organizes a competition between Baal and God in order to demonstrate to the Israelites that God is the Lord. The climax of this competition is God's theophany in fire. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal are to set out an offering on an altar. Next, the two sides will call out to their respective gods and whichever god answers through fire will be deemed the Lord. Baal does not respond. God, on the other hand, answers through fire, "...Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench." (1 Kings 18:38) Following the fiery Divine theophany the people express a renewed belief in God. "When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.'" (1 Kings 18:39)

Thus we see that in instances of crisis, where belief in God is immediately required in order to ensure the survival of the Israelite nation, God is manifest in fire as an accompaniment to His speech. Doubting God is the explicit crisis in the Elijah narrative and an underlying theme that runs through both the Gideon and the Moses narratives. Furthermore, in all three cases absolute faith is an immediate necessity for the survival of the Israelite people. In the Elijah story God's blaze of fire gives birth to the instantaneous belief of the Israelites. From this event we can understand God's unstated first sign to Moses. God appeared to Moses in the wilderness to enlist Moses in a divine mission that required complete faith. The sign employed to ensure this faith was the already burning flame.

Why is fire specifically chosen as the medium for Divine speech in these stories? While fire is sometimes dangerous and one must keep a distance from it, fire also provides warmth and safety in the bitter cold. Fire, in this sense, is a metaphor for reassurance and constancy – reassurance of God's existence and constancy of God's presence.

In her book, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg cites a midrash which makes a similar insight about God's use of fire in the Bible. The midrash comments on the language in Exodus 3:2, "*be-labath esh*," "in a blazing fire,"⁴ and makes a wordplay connecting the word *labath* to *lev*, heart:

”בלבת אש” – כדי ללבבו שיבא לסיני ויראה אותם אישות ולא יתירא מהן.

“In the heart of the fire” – To give Moses heart, so that when he reaches Sinai and sees those fires he will not be afraid of them.⁵

As Zornberg points out, there are several similarities between Moses’ experience at the burning bush and the Israelites experience at Sinai, another instance in which God uses the image of fire while communicating with people. However, it is also interesting that this midrash views the burning bush as an image of reassurance, as a medium to dispel doubts about God and imbue the viewer of the blaze with a strong and unswerving faith in God.

While there are other stories in the Bible which employ the image of fire, these three stories in particular convey most clearly the purpose of the Bible’s usage of this element. In the Moses, Gideon and Elijah narratives we encounter people whose belief in God’s presence is in doubt, and the response is for God to produce a fiery blaze to show God’s undisputable presence and preeminence in the lives of the Israelites. This image, and the message of encouragement that it carries with it, inspired the Israelites and their leaders in the time of the Exodus, Judges and Prophets, and continues to inspire us today.

The *ner tamid*, the eternal flame, which was once found in the Temple and has been hung above the ark in synagogues since ancient times is yet another example of fire symbolizing God’s presence. The sages of the Talmud explain that the *ner tamid* serves as testimony to those who see it that the *Shechina* rests within the Jewish people.⁶ Like the *ner tamid*, the symbol of fire in the exodus narrative and its biblical parallels serves as a reminder to us to remain strong and constant in our belief as we re-read the Exodus story year after year.

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² The speech derives either from an angel or from God Himself.

³ Ironically, Moses was hiding with his father-in-law (Exodus 3:1), a Midianite priest and Gideon was hiding from the Midianites (Judges 6:11).

⁴ Translation from *The Jewish Study Bible*.

⁵ Exodus Rabbah 2:8.

⁶ BT Shabbat 22b.

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