



Carnegie Shul Chatter

December 23, 2021



Light candles 4:40 — Shabbat Services 9:20am

Shemot in a Nutshell

Exodus 1:1–6:1

From Chabad.org

The children of Israel multiply in Egypt. Threatened by their growing numbers, Pharaoh enslaves them and orders the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill all male babies at birth. When they do not comply, he commands his people to cast the Hebrew babies into the Nile.

A child is born to Yocheved, the daughter of Levi, and her husband, Amram, and placed in a basket

Finding Strength

In our feature article from myjewishlearning.com we find this comment, “When we realize that a certain injustice in the world will always deeply disturb us, we gain the strength to address it—even without total confidence that we will succeed.”

The article, though an interesting one, seems to say that Moses’ drive to liberate his people in Egypt came from his own inner strength. I disagree.

I am sure that each and every one of us has faced at some time or another some injustice or some other problem that we did not think we could overcome, yet somehow we gained the strength to address the problem even without total confidence in our ability to succeed.

Where did the strength come from? Was it from within? Was it from, “the everlasting flames in our own hearts.” Or was it from God?

There have been times in my own life that the strength has come from within, but in times of my greatest struggles, my own strength has not been enough. In these very difficult times, when my own strength was not enough, I turned to God for help and it was only then that I found the strength to succeed. And, without God’s inspiration, I really doubt that Moses would have ever returned to Egypt to confront Pharaoh.

on the river, while the baby's sister, Miriam, stands watch from afar. Pharaoh's daughter discovers the boy, raises him as her son, and names him Moses.

As a young man, Moses leaves the palace and discovers the hardship of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian. The next day he sees two Jews fighting; when he admonishes them, they reveal his deed of the previous day, and Moses is forced to flee to Midian. There he rescues Jethro's daughters, marries one of them (Tziporah), and becomes a shepherd of his father-in-law's flocks.

G-d appears to Moses in a burning bush at the foot of Mount Sinai, and instructs him to go to Pharaoh and demand: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me." Moses' brother, Aaron, is appointed to serve as his spokesman. In Egypt, Moses and Aaron assemble the elders of Israel to tell them that the time of their redemption has come. The people believe; but Pharaoh refuses to let them go, and even intensifies the suffering of Israel.

Moses returns to G-d to protest: "Why have You done evil to this people?" G-d promises that the redemption is close at hand.



The Burning Bush

One of my favorite parts of this week's parshah is God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. Here is an interesting article about the burning bush from myjewishlearning.com, and, as you will read in my sidebar, there is a part of this article with which I disagree.

A Burning Within

We must find the causes that make us most passionate—and work for change.

By Sam Berrin Shonkoff

Many people who effect dramatic change in the world speak of having had a "calling," a powerful pull toward a particular life's work or path of action. In the Torah, God appears frequently as the emissary of Divine calling, inspiring people to rise to their destined paths of duty. Abraham and Sarah's three hungry guests, Jacob's wrestler of the night, and Elijah's "sound of small silence" are just a few examples. Today, in a world where we can't rely on theophany to inspire us to make a difference, how will we recognize a calling?



Even Before the Calling

In Parashat Shemot, the Divine appears to Moses as a burning bush that does not burn up. This “great sight” (Exodus 3:3), as Moses describes it, is not random. Midrash actually draws a linguistic connection between the “flame (lavah) of fire” and a heart (lev) of fire.



Something burns within Moses that will not go away—his visceral opposition to the slavery in Egypt. This is the message that emanates from the eternal flames, the awareness that arises in his heart of fire.

This is not the first time that Moses feels his deep-seated intolerance for the bondage of “his brothers” (Exodus 2:11), but thus far he has been afraid to face it. When he kills the Egyptian in defense of a Hebrew slave, he not only buries the body, he buries the personal implications of his actions by fleeing to the farthest reaches of the desert and beginning a new life in a remote community. Nonetheless, Moses cannot extinguish the fire within him, nor can he escape its heat.

His burning bush revelation ultimately empowers him to return to Egypt and take a stand. “The sages say: Seven whole days previously did God urge Moses to go on his mission, but he refused to go until the incident of the bush” (Sh’mot Rabbah 3:14). Mere nudging was insufficient. Moses needed to look upon his own heart, to see that he would always remain disturbed by the injustices in Egypt.

Pick a Cause

When we realize that a certain injustice in the world will always deeply disturb us, we gain the strength to address it—even without total confidence that we will succeed.

Moses certainly lacked confidence. In the presence of the burning bush, he expresses his heaviest anxieties. He feels inadequate and meek. He fears the unknown and the what-ifs of the future. Even God’s words and wonders cannot dissolve Moses’ doubts.



But he takes action nonetheless. He honors his burning bush within, his heart of fire. He realizes that his drive to liberate Israel will never abate, and although he lacks confidence that he will succeed, he is confident that he must try.

This is our paradigmatic tale of a “calling,” yet it challenges the conventional definition of this term as something that one was born to accomplish. Moses’ epiphany is not that he is destined to complete a mission—God does not promise success. Indeed, Moses’ fears and insecurities persist throughout his revelation.

Rather, Moses' profound realization is that his passion was present all along—he should honor his heated heart and begin. Perhaps callings reveal more about drives than destinies.

Just as Moses was called to fight for Jewish liberation from slavery, my friend CJ was a young teen when he learned about the sex slave trade. He felt a burning need to protect the dignity of the victims in this vicious business and to bring the propagators to justice. He recognized the fire of his own reaction. He felt driven to oppose these abuses against women.

Today CJ passionately and tirelessly addresses this very issue in Washington. He does not draw strength from a belief that this is the most important fight in the world, but from a sense that it is his most important fight. This self-knowledge enables him to persevere in his work, to continually choose to respond.

Each of us must ask ourselves: What is my burning bush? Which injustice in the world makes me cringe, cry, scream? These are the causes for which we are most equipped to act, as overwhelming as they may seem.

The inevitable waves of nervousness and self-doubt cannot deter us from action. We cannot wait until we feel completely ready, for that time will never come. Rather, we must draw strength from the everlasting flames in our own hearts—the burning that will never stop.

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The Carnegie Shul is most grateful for the following recent donations:

In Memory

Roger Wilk

In memory of Leona Kalson Wilk

Fran Merenstein

In memory of Melvin Allen Weiss

Yahrtzeits

This week the Carnegie Shul acknowledges the yahrtzeits of:

Leona K. Wilk

Kate Peresman

Julia Browarsky Korenberg

Dr. Samuel Sherman

May their memories be for a blessing.