

Getting Re-acquainted

An Aggadah based on Exodus 3:1-15: Moses and the burning bush.
Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Sept. 1, 2014 (based on an idea by Ralph Milton)



Moses is waking up from another restless night and stretches his stiff limbs. He's now well into his sixties, and his body sure is reminding him of it. Forty years... it's been almost forty years since he killed the Egyptian foreman, and it's still haunting his dreams.

It's going to be another hot day of herding the sheep of his brother-in-law. Moses stops for a moment and smiles.

The former prince of Egypt was now a common shepherd.

He doesn't mind doing it, though, in fact he's come to enjoy it. It gives him the opportunity to be by himself, away from others he doesn't belong with. When he was still a pampered prince he had often longed for that solitude.

As a Hebrew he never fit in with the Egyptians, as they never failed to let him know, too. He had to be careful not to make any missteps. They mistrusted him because he was not one of them, because he spoke with a Hebrew accent. So Moses never really knew who he was, Hebrew or an Egyptian. He was a stranger in both places.

After he had killed an Egyptian, the Pharaoh had the perfect excuse to get rid of Moses once and for all. But Moses escaped to the wilderness where the soldiers couldn't find him. He ran into the Midianites, busy group of herders and traders who moved in small bands all over the desert. Nobody would look for him among the Midianites, and so he joined them. He'd be safe with them.



There he heard about a god whom you could not see, but who saw you. A desert god they called "Yahweh". For the Midianites it was just another desert god among the many they had. They had dozens of sacred statues that they worshipped. Yahweh was their "just-in-case-god", just in case they had forgotten one; a spare god if you will.

This invisible god might not mean very much to the Midianites, but for Moses it was different. This god fascinated him. It vaguely reminded him of the old stories his mother had told him when he was still a child, before he was moved to the royal palace.

Somehow, an invisible god made sense to him. Statues and carvings of gods were too simple for him, too limited. A real god would be too big for a simple piece of wood or stone, he figured. A real god would be limitedless, would be everywhere – yet invisible at the same time. A real god would be strong yet intangible... like a windstorm or fire, he thought.

Forty years in the desert, forty years of tending sheep... Over those years he'd had many long and heated debates, pacing back and forth in the cold desert night, talking to himself, gesturing, sometimes yelling in grief and desperation, trying to get to grips with his past. Who was he, Egyptian or Hebrew? Who was this Moses, this coward who'd run away from the scene of a terrible crime? Who was this Moses, who now was looking for forgiveness, trying to make sense of his life, trying to give it direction?

He never really understood the gods the Egyptians worshipped. Sure, their statues and temples were impressive, but their gods seemed... distant and cruel. The gods of the Medianites were alien to him, too. Too earthy; too... carnal, too basic. And definitely too many.

But this one spare god of theirs, this invisible Yahweh somehow resonated with him. And it puzzled him. It didn't make sense. So he wanted to talk about it with someone; his father in law was the local priest, but he didn't get it and pretended to be too busy to talk about it. Moses' wife Zipporah tried to ignore the questions he brought up, they clearly made her feel uncomfortable. And his brother in law, a rich and respected sheep trader, bluntly told him not to say or even think these blasphemous things. So once again he found himself alone, out of place and distrusted by the people close to him.

More heated discussions followed, more pacing back and forth in the cold desert night, more yelling at the silent stars. But as the seasons and the years rolled by, something began to change within Moses. He wasn't aware of it, but ever so slowly he was... changing inside.

Sometimes he had flashes of insight, some vague understanding of how *his* personal past and suffering connected to the past of the Hebrew people and *their* suffering. He began to see some hazy connection between the old stories his mother had told him - and his feelings of respect for this Yahweh god.

And so, Moses the hotheaded Egyptian prince slowly transformed into the more mellow shepherd Moses. He calmed down. He started to think and meditate. He'd

later joke that a bunch of dumb sheep had saved his sanity, and in a way he was right. But he still had thousands of questions, he still felt empty. It felt as if one big piece of the puzzle was still missing. He could *almost* see the full picture, he just needed that last missing piece...

Little does he know that today he would find that missing piece; or rather: it would find *him*. It's the middle of a hot day; the sun is beating down on a dusty desert landscape. His sheep are all huddled in the shade of a few skinny trees, while Moses is trying to keep cool in the shade of an overhanging rock. It's too hot to do anything but think and meditate and sleep a little until the worst heat has passed.

Moses is beginning to nod off, when he hears a soft crackling sound. He sighs and gets up on his feet. He knows that sound, it's a small desert fire. It doesn't take much for those tinder-dry bushes to burst into flames. He walks around the rock and sees he was right. Better make sure the fire won't spread, he thinks; but then notices something unusual...



Moses would never forget the life-altering experience he had that day: "This wasn't just a simple little desert fire", he'd tell you years later. "This was different. I could swear the other bushes around it didn't catch fire, in fact, even the bush itself didn't seem to be burning .Yet, something *like* a fire was right there. I can't describe it any other way." His voice would trail off and he'd look away over the desert, reliving that moment again in his mind's eye...

We all know what happened: Moses encountered Yahweh, the great "I Am Who Is", who convinces him it is his calling to return to Egypt to negotiate with the Pharaoh. We know of the ten plagues; the first Passover; then the great Exodus, and freedom for the Hebrew people at last.

Hollywood used it to produce a number of blockbuster movies over the years. Spectacular as they are, they focus on impressive special effects but they don't tell the *real* story.

The real story is about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had not forgotten about the Hebrews – even though they had forgotten about God. The real story is about God who chose a displaced person, a stammering coward like Moses, to remind the Hebrew people who they were, what their purpose was, and push them into action.

Moses knew even less about Yahweh than the Hebrews did. But somehow on that day in the desert, all the pieces fell into place. Suddenly, it all made sense. And he knew what to do – even though he didn't think he could do it...

This story is an invitation to think of ourselves a little bit as Moses. We may not know exactly who we are and what our purpose is. We may feel out of place, inadequate, maybe even sinful, just like Moses. But just like Moses, God is waiting patiently for us to get re-acquainted again – and again.

If we open ourselves up to it, it will happen when you least expect it, and in a way that will be hard to describe. Like a bush that's on fire but won't burn. But more often, God will reveal God's self in a still, small voice.

And just like Moses, we'll have to realize God will not make our lives any easier or smooth things over. On the contrary: often our lives will be more challenging, maybe even nerve-racking, as Moses found out, too.

And that's okay. Because just like Moses, we will be made aware of a powerful presence that will always be with us, always be guiding us, no matter what happens. A presence that empowers the powerless, the poor, the voiceless and the weak and tells them, tell us: I have heard you; you are mine. And I have great plans for you.

Amen.