

The day is hot as a lone shepherd makes his way through the desert. Despite the blazing heat, the blinding sun that causes sweat to drip in rivulets down the shepherd's face, the shepherd's thoughts aren't for himself, but for his charges. As he wanders the rocks looking for any stray sheep, a strange glow catches his eye. Turning to look he sees a bush. The bush is ablaze with fire but is not being consumed. As he stares at this sight in wonder and awe, a voice proclaims, "Moses, Moses."

Before we go any further I should say, yes, I know what holiday this is and, yes, I know it's not Pesach. So don't worry, we won't be putting out matzah for the oneg after services. Those of you who read the last newsletter may realize that I'm bringing up the passage where God appears to Moses in the burning bush because our congregation has been invited to take part in a program organized through the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College where we will be studying this critical text over the course of the year. Our goal in learning, exploring, and engaging with this text is to see how its power might transform our community. At various points during the year we will be hosting RRC student Malka Packer who will lead a series of creative explorations of this passage as part of the new Transformative Text Project, and I'll encourage you to be on the lookout for these exciting and innovative programs which will be beginning next month.

Transformation: Rosh ha-Shanah, these High Holidays are, ideally, about transformation. We are called to envision the people we might want to become and strive to remake ourselves in that image – or at least closer to it – so that we might actively *enter* the year afresh, transformed, rather than just passively letting the New Year happen. For his last birthday Adir received a butterfly pavilion – some of you may be familiar with it. You're sent live caterpillars in a jar with food and you watch over the next days as they eat and grow larger, molt, and finally attach themselves to a piece of paper at the top of the jar and form a chrysalis. Once all the caterpillars have become chrysalises – chrysalis??? – you remove the paper and pin it inside a large mesh pavilion – it's sort of like a large see-through slinky. And then you wait while, over the next few days, the caterpillar, tucked inside the chrysalis, transforms itself into a butterfly. You can't see any of this incredible process taking place; all you can see is the chrysalis itself. And because so much is hidden from view, the moment when the butterflies first begin emerging from the chrysalis, fully formed, is absolutely miraculous. So much has happened beneath the surface: in plain sight and yet not visible to our eyes.

Oh that we were caterpillars, who could transform at will, dissolve our old selves as Rosh ha-Shanah approaches and emerge into the New Year as these beautiful, newly-formed creatures. Alas that's not the case: we are and remain all too human, with all the possibilities and limitations that state entails. Yet we too are capable of great change beneath the surface, and I'd like to suggest that our transformative burning bush can offer us important guidance about the transformations we might seek to undertake personally and communally in the year just now beginning.

First we need to remind ourselves of what the Book of Exodus says at the beginning of chapter 3: "Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God at Horeb. And the angel of the Lord was seen by him in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush; and he looked and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said: 'I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt up.' And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called out to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses.' And he said, 'Here am I.'"

Like the chrysalis, the surface simplicity of this text belies the amazing depth of the power and drama taking place below. Like many of the Torah's stories – like Abraham's expulsion of Hagar which we read earlier today or the story of Abraham's binding of Isaac which we read tomorrow – the Torah relates its extraordinary events in an almost stubbornly matter-of-fact manner without commenting or even hinting at what the protagonists are feeling inside. We're never told *why* God appears to Moses at the bush or *how* Moses feels about this encounter – whether the vision of the bush inspires him in dreams and mocks him in nightmares for years to come; we are told simply what everyone says and does. The Torah shows us the surface; and the interior lives, the extraordinary events and emotions taking place *beneath* the surface are left for us to imagine. And so in form the Torah is like a chrysalis: presenting a surface that is elegant, beautiful, extraordinary; but hard at times to penetrate, to discern the even more miraculous work taking place beneath. And on Rosh ha-Shanah, we are reminded that the same is true of us as well; for our words and actions over the past year are mere hints of the core of who we are which often remains hidden beneath the surface, not only from others but from ourselves as well. Torah by its very nature challenges us to dig deeper to understand, because the truest meanings are not evident at the surface, and to understand and have the capacity to transform ourselves we must push further inside. We cannot focus only on what we say and do – the surface – but penetrate to the heart to try to discern the reasons, the motivations, the hopes and fears that drive and impel us and which constitute the true story of ourselves. As the Torah demands engagement and exploration so do we as well. To be remade as a butterfly, it is not enough to affect change at the outer layer of our words and actions – important and necessary though this may be. We must dig deeper, go beyond the surface and try to affect change not so much in our *actions* but in our *hearts* because this is where deeper transformation lies, and without affecting change at our core, any change in our actions will be ungrounded and, ultimately, unsustainable.

So let's accept the Torah's invitation and challenge and dig a little deeper with our story of the bush and see what wisdom it can offer us as we strive to affect our own inner transformations.

Always when examining ourselves – or *any* text – we must read carefully and closely. And so our passage states: "And the angel of the Lord was seen by him in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush; and he saw and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said: 'I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt up.' And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called out to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses.' And he said, 'Here am I.'" Let's try to figure out the sequence of events: first the angel appears, then Moses sees it, then Moses *says* let me turn aside to see it, then Moses turns and then God calls out to him. Seeing, obviously, is critical, but not just casually seeing: seeing in a way that one stops, notices, pays attention. First Moses had to notice the bush itself, which may not seem like such a stretch but again, it's worth paying attention to the words of our text: "The angel of the Lord was seen by him in a flame of fire." What's new is the angel's appearance, not necessarily the fire itself. Perhaps that bush had been already burning for days, or weeks, or since the beginning of time. Perhaps no one else had come out this way, or perhaps no one had noticed it. Or perhaps I'm reading in and the bush sprang into flame just as Moses passed by. But then he has to stop and look and notice that the bush is not being consumed by the fire. Desert bushes are tough: they have heavy leaves that hold in the rare precious moisture they suck from the ground. They will not burn quickly or easily. Moses has to stop, really *look* to tell that the bush is not being consumed. And it is only when this happens that God calls to him.

The divine call, it would seem, comes only after Moses stops to pay attention, and the same is true for us as well. We are surrounded in this world by bushes that are ablaze – poverty, disease, inequality, sectarian violence – but we seldom stop to truly look: to pay attention in a way that opens us up to receive their call, pay attention to what they are demanding of us as when Moses hears the call to free the Israelites from slavery. Rosh ha-Shanah demands that we pay attention – to the world around us and to our own lives. We are, all of us, a riot of burning bushes: of shortcomings and failures and weaknesses and alienation that cry out for compassionate attention. But we almost never notice: because we're too busy, or because it's too hard, or because after a while the burning bushes simply fade into the landscape so completely we hardly even realize they're there. Change, transformation, isn't possible until we stop to notice, stop to pay attention as Moses does: turn aside, turn inward, to truly look. That's what these Holidays are about: clearing the landscape of our lives so we can notice the fires that are burning and clearing our hearts so we can hear the call that accompanies the fire and respond: Here am I. I am truly here and I am ready.

After Adir's butterflies emerged from their cocoons, orange and black wings sprouting from slender bodies, everyone marveled at how beautiful and delicate they were as they feasted on the sugar water and orange slices we laid out for them. But I was fascinated most by the chrysalises, their former homes, that were left dangling pitifully on the inside of the mesh. When the caterpillars first formed the chrysalises, they were a shiny almost lurid green. Now they were brown, shriveled, withered – an unfitting host for such an amazing transformation, it seemed. The rabbis imagine the *sneh*, the bush of our story, on similar terms. It is a thorn bush they tell us, the only kind that can thrive in the barren desert. Without the divine fire which temporarily envelopes it, the *sneh* is a lowly, unassuming plant with no beauty – a nuisance that you notice only in annoyance when it snags on your clothes: in other words, something beneath our attention like that discarded chrysalis husk. Now generally – hopefully – we have a very different image of ourselves than we do of a thorn bush. Unless we have extraordinarily low self esteem, we view ourselves as important, worthwhile, worthy of attention and affection. But on a cosmic scale, we are tiny motes; and on days like this one when we are conscious of the ways we have hurt and harmed others during the past year, we may begin to feel lowly and undeserving ourselves – perhaps not so different from that insignificant thorn bush or discarded chrysalis. The rabbis compare the thorn bush to Israel, lowliest of nations; but we might also understand God's appearance in the bush as a sign that no plant, no place – no person – is too lowly as to be unworthy of God's concern and attention. By appearing to Moses through the bush, God affirms that the Divine can be manifest anywhere, even in the thorny barren environment that might exist in our hearts. It's a hopeful and reassuring lesson for Rosh ha-Shanah, when we need and want help and support, even as we might feel either undeserving of or too insignificant for God's consideration. Not so, says the thorn bush out of which God addresses Moses. Any of us can be a fitting host for God, none of us is below God's attention, and God can be made manifest within any of us – at any moment, unexpectedly – as a burning flame that calls out with purpose and hope.

The burning flame: this is the image that sticks most in all of our minds, of a flame that burns but does not consume. It's an audacious and improbable one. Of course fire burns; that's what it does. We learn from a young age the danger of fire: the deep attraction it holds for us – something primeval, from a caveman past – is heightened by the awareness – and perhaps thrill? – of danger: that this is something that can hurt, burn, destroy. As a symbol, fire is complex and contradictory: the very power

that gives us light, warmth, heat; the ability to create and be inspired; the avenue to holiness when ancient Israelites offered sacrifices and sent them heavenward on plumes of smoke... is also a force capable of causing unimaginable pain and destruction, the divine flame that blazes out against Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu which we recall in our Yom Kippur Torah reading, forge of weapons that hurt and destroy. Fire has a life of its own: a small match becomes a flickering flame becomes a roaring fire becomes a devastating blaze in a matter of minutes: just ask the residents of Washington State and other parts of the Northwest where wildfires are burning out of control, claiming forests, property, and homes. Fire is insatiable: it will keep consuming until there is nothing left to claim, and only then burn itself out.

This insatiability is perhaps the most terrifying aspect of fire: given the chance, one feels, it would completely consume and destroy the world. At least that's the way it's supposed to work. But for a moment, in the desert at Mt. Horeb, things do not work the way experience teaches us they should. The frail bush withstanding the rapacious fire seems an assurance and promise of its own: that things will not always work as we expect, that the weak will not always fall to the powerful, that injustice and hatred will not always hold sway, that things that burn us will not always destroy us. For make no mistake: the bush *does* burn. The Torah tells us that the bush burns with fire, *but* is not consumed. The bush knows what it is to burn yet improbably – *impossibly* – is not destroyed as the price for this secret knowledge. And at Rosh ha-Shanah this fact may hold out the most important message of all. Through the course of the year we make ourselves thorn bushes: we become prickly in every sense of the word, our hearts become hard and inhospitable, presenting a potentially unwelcoming face to the outside world, shepherding every drop of precious life-giving water for ourselves and stubbornly clinging to our surroundings.

Yet once a year, we are enjoined to burn with holy fire. At the High Holidays we acknowledge our wrongdoings through the year, we apologize to those whom we have hurt and ask forgiveness from God. And in doing so we become like the bush which burns with fire but is not consumed: we allow the impulse for change and transformation to burn within us; yet far from destroying us, it instead purifies and strengthens us, burning away only those shortcomings and misdeeds and allowing our core to emerge intact and ready for whatever the New Year demands from us. It is painful acknowledging not only our deficiencies but also our capacity to overcome them if we try with all our might: it burns. But when we make this effort with a sincere and contrite heart, God speaks out of that fire that burns within us and offers hope and strength, the assurance that we are not in this alone and that more is possible in this world than we might expect.

Let us strive this Rosh ha-Shanah to make ourselves into bushes. Let us acknowledge our lowliness, and the ways we make ourselves hard so we do not feel ourselves fitting vessels through which God can be manifest. Let us strive this Rosh ha-Shanah to make ourselves into holy fire, burning with an insatiable desire – not to destroy but rather to purify and transform, making stronger what it leaves behind. Let us strive this Rosh ha-Shanah to be Moses, human and imperfect, yet able to stop and pay attention, to notice the world around us and ourselves; to declare 'Here am I' and to listen to the voice that calls to us urging us to do more. Let us strive to be butterflies, renewed and transformed as we are released into the New Year, our fragile yet strong wings carrying us in orange flashes that are like flickers of divine flame. And let us all strive to be sacred texts: full of complexities and contradictions, ambitious and ambiguous, pregnant with possibilities, self deconstructing and

reconstructing, inviting questions, and yet full of wisdom to be gleaned when we engage the text of our own lives with openness and reverence. May we all read deeply, learn deeply, feel deeply, and be transformed by and during these Holy days.