

PARSHAT SHEMOT
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In the fall of 1971 and again in the fall of 1974, I visited Santa Katerina Monastery which lies in the Sinai Peninsula at the foot of what is known as Jebel Musa, commonly known as Mount Sinai. Built between 548 and 565, the monastery is one of the oldest working Christian monasteries in the world. It contains a library with many unique books and manuscripts.

According to tradition, Catherine of Alexandria was a Christian martyr sentenced to death on the wheel. When this failed to kill her, she was beheaded. Angels then took her remains to Mount Sinai. Around the year 800, monks from the Sinai Monastery found her remains.

The monastery itself was built by the order of Emperor Justinian in the 6th century, enclosing the Chapel of the Burning Bush ordered to be built by Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, at the site where Moses is supposed to have seen the burning bush. The living bush on the grounds is purportedly the very one seen by Moses. Whether you believe it or not, standing in front of the burning bush, and at the foot of Mount Sinai, transports one back into ancient Israelite history and into the era of Biblical times.

In our Torah reading this morning Moses confronts the actual burning bush. The text tells us: “He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed.” It is out of this bush that an angel of the Lord appears to Moses and begins the discourse which eventually led to Moses going to Egypt and becoming the liberator and then the lawgiver of the people of Israel.

This burning bush has remained an important motif in Jewish tradition. It is the symbol of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Conservative Movement. For many years *The Burning Bush Press* published important works on behalf of Conservative Judaism. Solomon Schechter had selected the emblem of the burning bush as a token of his visionary wish that “the light of knowledge, while burning fiercely, would not consume the student.” For Schechter it represented the light of Torah which was ever-burning in the light of the Seminary and Judaism. Lewis Loeb, designer of the Lincoln penny, was the person responsible for the familiar Seminary symbol.

The symbol, for me, also represents the eternity of the Jewish people, even when some of it is singed, it is not consumed. That burning bush continues to remain for us a powerful symbol, not merely of G-d’s appearance to Moses, but of the continuation of our relationship with G-d, the Torah, and the Jewish people. Though the bush may look damaged, it is never consumed and remains ever-present in the world.

Mark Twain, the great American author, had lived in Austria during 1896 and ascertained that the Habsburg Empire used scapegoats to maintain unity in their immensely diverse empire, mainly the Jews. In 1898, he published an article “Stirring Times in Austria.” Twain received many letters, including one from an American-Jewish lawyer who asked Twain: “Tell me, from

your vantage point of cold view, what in your mind is the cause? Can American Jews do anything to correct it either in America or abroad? Will it ever come to an end?" In response, Twain penned an essay entitled "Concerning the Jews" which *Harper Magazine* published in 1898.

While the essay itself is all that not complimentary to the Jewish people, which was typical for that period and era, Twain offers a fascinating conclusion. He writes:

"If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of; has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in the world, in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

This is how Mark Twain ends his essay. He seems puzzled by the fact that the Jews continued to survive against all odds. The essay was written in 1898. Long before the world wars and the Shoah, his words still resonate. We continue to recognize that against all odds the Jewish people continue to survive and to acknowledge the contributions of the Jewish people to the world and the continued existence of a Judaic framework to our society. It reminds us of the burning bush and the fact that the bush remained intact in the face of all the flames. It symbolizes our people surviving against all odds, all oppressions, all persecutions.

Daniel Gordis has just written a book entitled *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* in which he traces the history of the state from the very beginning until this present day. He begins in his introduction by quoting the very same essay by Mark Twain. Twain noted, in his essay, that one Jewish man had a strategy for ensuring that the Jews would have a future better than the past. "Have you heard of Theodor Herzl's plan? He wishes to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine, with a government of their own... At the first Zionist Congress last year... there were delegates from everywhere, and the proposal was received with decided favor."

While Twain was quite complimentary he also had his reservations, "I am not the Sultan, and I am not objecting; but if that concentration of the cunningest brains in the world were going to be made in a free country... I think it would be politic to stop it. It will not be well to let the race find out its strength. If the horses knew theirs, we should not ride anymore."

Well, as we know, exactly 50 years later the State of Israel was created and against all odds it has continued to maintain itself to this very day. A century since the 1917 Balfour Declaration with Arab riots, the Shoah, wars, and terrorist actions, Israel continues to survive and, in many ways, to thrive. Gordis reminds us of the dreamers of Zion from Theodor Herzl himself to Ahad Ha'am, who wanted Israel to be a spiritual homeland; from A.D. Gordon, who urged the Jews to return to working their land to authors and leaders Bialik, Nordau, and Jabotinsky who urged the Jewish people to be victims no longer; from Eliezer ben Yehuda who reinvented the modern Hebrew language to the visionaries of this day. It is because of them that the State of Israel continued to survive throughout the years against extraordinary odds.

Charles Krauthammer, in an article in September 2012, according to Gordis, captured the accomplishment perfectly. "Plant a Jewish people in a country that comes to a standstill on Yom Kippur; speaks the language of the Bible; moves to the rhythms of the Hebrew calendar; builds cities with the stones of its ancestors; produces Hebrew poetry and literature, Jewish scholarship and learning unmatched anywhere in the world – and you have continuity."

In a country with a language reborn, where start-ups and new technologies are constantly being invented, in a land surrounded by civil wars and dictatorships, Israel remains under siege. Yet, it continues to survive. There is so much more that needs to be done to create the model society that was envisioned by its early dreamers and visionaries, but in a country less than 70 years old it has, most assuredly, come a long way. Gordis in his book attempts to highlight that journey with facts even as he offers many questions for the future.

Near the end of the book he asks this question: "What fueled that grit and determination? Why did the Jews succeed when so many others did not? There were many causes, but key among them was the fact, as Golda Meir put it, 'The Jews have a secret weapon: we have nowhere else to go.'"

It is the story of the burning bush once more. The fire burns, but the bush is not consumed. It is singed and loses some of its glow, but it continues against all odds to survive and, in fact, to thrive.

These are challenging times in the world at-large and in the Middle East. This is a difficult time for religious individuals to have hope in the future and build collegiality and common purpose with others. These are uncertain times with new leadership in this country and many questions yet to be answered. However, the emblem of the burning bush, I believe, is not merely a model for Conservative Judaism, it is an appropriate motif for the Jewish people.

May the fire of learning and knowledge, the fire of passion and sincerity, the fire of mystery and Jewish eternity continue to burn and may the Jewish people, Judaism, and the State of Israel continue to survive all challenges, and maintain itself strong and vital for centuries to come.