



Photocopy of original, handwritten letter

..... DID MOSES THWART GOD'S PLAN?
A Study of the Application of Avur Rahok

MOSES STOOD IN AWE AT THE SITE OF THE BURNING BUSH.

Even as he hears God's attempt to appoint him leader of the enslaved Israelites, Moses offers many reasons as to why he is not the ideal candidate. God insists and Moses relents. At some point after Moses's return to his father-in-law's home, the Torah tells us:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּקוֹל הַיְהוָה אֵיךְ אֶתְּנֶנְךָ אֶת־עַמְּךָ מִצְרַיִם לְעַבְדֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים כִּי אֵינְךָ אֶתְּנֶנְךָ לְעַבְדֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: (Exodus 4:19)

Who are these people who sought Moses's life? It would seem that the obvious answer is Pharaoh, whose death is recorded immediately before the account of the burning bush.

Now it came to pass in those many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry ascended to God from the labor; Moses was pasturing the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, the Chief of Midian; he led the flocks far into the wilderness, and he came to the mountain of God, to Horeb. An

From correspondence dated 18 Tevet 5737/December 20, 1976, and conversation with Nechama Liebowitz 12 Adar, 5756/March 5, 1996.

angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire
 מַלְאָכְיָהוּ אֱלֹהִים בְּאֵשׁ לֶחֶם אֵשׁ
 from within the thorn bush, and behold, the thorn
 בִּשְׂרָפְתָהּ אֵשׁ וְהָיָה מִן־הָאֵשׁ וְהָיָה
 bush was burning with fire, but the thorn bush was
 וְהָיָה מִן־הָאֵשׁ וְהָיָה מִן־הָאֵשׁ
 not being consumed. (Exodus 2:3-3:2)

Indeed, the Ibn Ezra states that Pharaoh was the one seeking Moses's life. The plural reference in 4:19, "all the people," includes his advisers, who had also died in the meantime. However, Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, disagrees:

"Who were they? Dathan and Abiram. They were alive, but they lost their property, and a pauper is considered dead."

(Talmud *Nedarim* 64b)

Why would Rashi deviate from the apparent plain meaning to record a metaphorical explanation of death?

In December 1976 (Tevet 5737), I wrote to Nechama Lebowitz to propose that the application of the *amar raihoq* principle – or the lack of it – might explain the basis of this dispute between Rashi and the Ibn Ezra. The opening verse of Exodus 3 states:

Moses was pasturing the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, the Chief of Midian. He led the flocks far
 וּמֹשֶׁה מֵדַבֵּר אֶת־יְהוָה לֵאמֹר אֲנִי מִדְּבַר
 into the wilderness, and he came to the mountain
 אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
 of God, to Horeb. (Exodus 3:1)

Note that contrary to normal biblical usage, the subject (Moses) precedes the verb in the above verse. If we understand the phrase *וְהָיָה מִן־הָאֵשׁ*, "Moses was pasturing," as an instance of *amar raihoq*, Moses's tending to the flock, the burning bush and (illegit) God's command to return to Egypt all precede Pharaoh's death. Therefore, Rashi was forced to find another explanation for the plain meaning of the text.

Nechama Lebowitz rejected my suggestion. She said the factor that motivated Rashi to identify those who had "died" as Dathan and Abiram – who were actually alive – is the terminology that the Torah uses: "those

who seek" (בַּיְהוָה יִשְׁעוּ). The present tense indicates the action is currently under way. Dathan and Abiram are perpetual antagonists. They continue their campaign against Moses, but no one pays attention to them because they have lost their wealth and their influence along with it.

Twice more I argued for the application of the *amar raihoq* principle to this verse. Each time, Nechama rejected my idea. Two decades later, I renewed my proposal, this time suggesting that the *amar raihoq* explanation served a purpose.

I shared with Nechama Lebowitz a thought from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l*. In a lecture entitled "The Philosophy of Prayer," the Rav suggested that God is often prepared to provide humans with what that they need, but they must ask Him first. The human being must recognize that something is lacking and articulate this need. Only after one has put one's need into words does one truly understand it, and only then is God more committed to a positive response.

During the time of the Egyptian slavery, the Israelites did not sense the immorality of their enslavement. They accepted their status in silence. Moses was the first to highlight the injustice by striking the Egyptian taskmaster. The Israelites' first expression of dissatisfaction with their lot follows the death of Pharaoh. It is then that the nation groaned and cried to God.

"God heard their cry," the Torah tells us, "God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the children of Israel, and God knew" (Exodus 2:24-25).

What happened then? The Torah records that while Moses was pasturing Jethro's flock, he happened upon the burning bush. At first, Moses did not agree to God's request that he lead the Jewish people out of slavery. Offering a string of reasons why he was not the proper choice, Moses, according to the Midrash, extended the dialogue between himself and God for seven days.

Imagine the scene. After decades of enslavement, the Israelites ask God for relief. God is prepared to initiate the process of redemption through His designated emissary, Moses. But Moses is unwilling. Did Moses thwart God's plan? According to Ibn Ezra's reading of the verse, one would have to say yes: Moses was responsible for delaying God's plan for His people's salvation.

However, according to Rashi, with the application of the rule of *anur rishah*, the episode at the burning bush occurred before Pharaoh's death. By the time Pharaoh died, Moses had already accepted God's appointment and may even have been on the road to Egypt. There was no delay. As soon as the Jewish nation cried out with the recognition that something was wrong in their lives and that only God could help, God put His plan of response into immediate action.

As the episode of the burning bush occurred before Pharaoh's death, God could not have been referring to him when he said: "Go, return to Egypt, for all the people who seek your life have died." Hence, Rashi suggests that Moses's antagonists were Dahan and Ahiram.

After my twenty-year campaign, Nechama Lebowitz accepted my suggestion.¹

RECOGNIZING AN ENCOUNTER

WITH GOD

ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS EPISODES IN THE TORAH PRESENTS Abraham sitting at the entrance to his tent on an extremely hot day. According to the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 86b), Abraham was recu- perating from his *brit milah* (circumcision). In fact, our sages say that it was the third and most painful day of recuperation. God appears to Abraham in this setting. Why? Why, we may also ask, does the Torah choose to share this encounter with us?

Strangely absent from the Torah's record of this event is a statement from the Almighty. While the Torah states, "God appeared to him [Abraham]" nowhere are we told what, if anything, God said to him. Nechama Lebowitz endorsed the opinion that God did not say anything. The whole purpose of God's appearance, said Nechama, was for God to be present with Abraham, to be at his side during the healing process.

The foundation for a silent appearance, explained Nechama, is found in the Ramban's commentary to Genesis 18:1. The Torah states:

God appeared to him on the Plains of Mamre and he was sitting at the entrance of the tent in the heat
 וַיִּשְׁרַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת עֵינָיו מֵהַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּבְרָךְ אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי
 וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי
 וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי וְעַתָּה יָדָעְתָּ כִּי אֵל אֲנִי

The Ramban observes, "Divine revelation here . . . is not for the purpose

¹ I later discovered that the Malbin, in his commentary to Exodus 3:1, also identifies the phrase *anur rishah* ("Moses was pasturing") as an example of *anur rishah*.

From conversation with Nechama Lebowitz on 3 Terev 5753/December 27, 1992.