

## PARASHAT SHEMOT

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### “SEEING HOLINESS”

In 1938, one of my favorite poets, William Butler Yeats, was presented with a gift. The gift was sculpture of three Chinese monks carved out of deep-blue lapis lazuli stone. Contemplating the sculpture at length, he composed his poem, entitled “Lapis Lazuli.” The last two stanzas: he writes:

*Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
Are carved in lapis lazuli,  
Over them flies a long-legged bird,  
A symbol of longevity;  
The third, doubtless a serving-man,  
Carries a musical instrument.*

*Every discoloration of the stone,  
Every accidental crack or dent,  
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
Or lofty slope where it still snows  
Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch  
Sweetens the little half-way house  
Those Chinamen climb towards, and I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.*

In the frozen scene, Yeats sees life – while the sculpture captures a fleeting moment in time, the story plays out – the story could fill tomes. And he sees the sparkling eyes of the sculpture’s subjects – through their eyes he sees what the monks see: the tragedies of life, and yet their eyes are knowing, and ultimately, hopeful.

With Yeats' keen vision, he gives life to the monks – inanimate objects come to life – and through their life and experience, Keats gains a new perspective. It is Yeats' vision that begins this special process.

In like manner, we learn from our parasha, that Moses has a special kind of vision. Passing a mundane desert plant, Moses sees, but doesn't really see – out of the bush he hears a Divine voice calling him – he turns back and then he really sees. This once pathetic bush becomes a holy sight. It is so holy that he must remove his shoes, as he recognizes that he is standing on holy ground. Once his vision is attuned, he is able to sense God's presence and the true relationship that forges Moses leadership of our people is ignited. Holy dialogue ensues from holy vision.

In my first year of rabbinic studies at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, we were privileged to travel to the Sinai (1979, the year that it was turned over to Egypt to create peace). The day we arrived at Santa Catherina, the monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, one of the monks took us on a tour of the ancient place. We looked in rooms, saw the reliquary (where relics of past monks were stored – clearly not a Jewish tradition) and as we were walking down an uncovered corridor, we turned a corner, and the guide pointed to an almost dead plant (similar to every ficus tree I ever tried to keep indoors, with falling leaves, and consisting mostly of bare branches), and he declared, "That was the burning bush." Every one of my classmates broke out into long and hearty laughter. Later that day near sunset, I returned to the place alone and contemplated this plant. Why couldn't it be the burning bush? It really just depends on how we look at it. And there I felt that I, too, was standing on holy ground, with the shadow of Sinai slowly creeping over me.

As a rabbi, one of the blessings that I receive is being invited to officiate at a couple's wedding ceremony. But according to Jewish law, there is nothing that I do or say that makes the couple "married," I am simply a "mesadaer kiddushin" (one who sees that the event occurs according to Jewish law). What makes the couple married is a declaration: "Haray At (ata) Mikudeshet (mikudash) li..." "Behold, you are made holy in my eyes...." What this means is that one says to the other, "No-one in my life will I look at, the way I look at you; dream about, the way I dream about you; touch, in the way I touch you.... There are other people, and then there is you, elevated above all others – made holy in my life." The couple makes themselves married by the way that they look at each other – by seeing the other as holy.

It is often difficult to see holiness: tragedy and sadness are also filtered through our eyes and we can become inured to life's holy qualities. But we can create holiness with our eyes, though an act of will.

Yeats saw holiness in a carved blue stone. Moses saw holiness in a bush. I saw holiness at a monastery in the desert. And couples find holiness under a huppah as they begin a new chapter in their lives together.

Holiness exists all around us – we need only open our eyes and really see.