

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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CREATION AND THE BURNING BUSH: A HEALING PRACTICE

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The story of the burning bush is one of the most dramatic and memorable in the Torah. It bespeaks a power beyond the normal parameters within which we live our lives. It should not be surprising, then, that Jews in the rabbinic era used the power of this story to heal themselves in the in the most literal way:

Rabbi Yohanan said: For an inflammatory fever let one take an all-iron knife, go whither thorn-hedges are to be found, and tie a white twisted thread thereto. On the first day he must slightly notch it, and say, "and the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, etc. (Exodus 3:2)" On the following day he [again] makes a small notch and says, "And Moses said, I will turn aside now, and see, etc." The next day he makes [another] small notch and says, "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside [say] to see (Exodus 3:4)." Rav Aha son of Raba son to Rav Ashi, Then let him say, "Draw not nigh hither?" Rather on the first day he should say, "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, etc." "And Moses said, I will, etc."; the next day he says, "And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see"; on the third, "And he said, Draw not night." And when he recited his verses he pulls it down [sc. the bush] and says thus: "O thorn, O thorn, not because you are higher than all other trees did the Holy One, blessed be He, caused His Shekhinah to rest upon you, but because you are lower than all other trees did He cause His Shekhinah to rest upon you. And even as you saw the fire [kindled] for Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and did flee from before them, so look upon the fire [i.e., fever] of So-and-so and flee from him" (B. Shabbat 67a)

The procedure outlined in this passage is far from clear. We can conjecture that persons with severe fevers wanted them to be "fires that did not consume" and they would go to a bush like the one in our passage and recite the verses about it from Exodus 3. This practice was so well-known and/or widespread that there were even variant versions of it; Rabbi Yohanan's and Rav Aha's. Then the sick person adjures the fever to leave without consuming him/her as it left the bush in our passage and as it left, untouched, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah who were thrown into a furnace and yet were not burned (Daniel 3:19-25).

Are we, as Jews, permitted to use verses from the Tanach to heal ourselves? On the one hand, reciting verses because of their healing power is a widespread Jewish practice. (See the article on "Bibliomancy" in the Jewish Encyclopedia for a long list of the uses to which various verses are put). On the other hand, using Biblical verses as magic formulae is forbidden (M. Sanhedrin 11:1).

There is a connection between the fire of the bush and the story of creation found in the first chapter of Genesis which may help us understand the story better. The word bush (sneh/hasneh) occurs five times in this passage and in only one other place in all of Torah (Deuteronomy 33:16):

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, unto Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of 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." And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses". And he said, "Here am I". And He said, "Draw not nigh hither; put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy

ground." (Exodus 3:1-5)

If we look at the account of the very first day of creation, we see a parallel between it and the story of the bush:

In a beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep and God's spirit floated on the face of the water. And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. And God saw the light that it was good. And God differentiated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day and the darkness night and there was evening and there was morning, one day. (Genesis 1:1-5)

Just as the word bush occurred 5 times in our passage, so the word light occurs five times in the account of creation's first day. Yalkut R'uveini, a mystical commentary on the Torah, surmises that the light that came from the bush is this primordial light: the very first light of creation, the light of healing, the light of the smallest and greatest facets of creation, the light of a religious fervor that enlightens and does not consume its adherents. The Zohar also suggests that the 5 occurrences of the word bush are the five books of the Torah, revealed to Moses already in this moment.

Discussion Question:

1. May one recite Biblical verses to comfort oneself and inspire confidence and hope when one is ill, but not as incantations? Does the practice outlined above follow this rule?