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THE BURNING BUSH IN THE MIDRASH: SOME NEW INSIGHTS

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This Shabbat, we begin reading the book of Exodus. The midrash on Exodus that you probably know is called Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, The Portion of Rabbi Ishmael. It covers the book of Exodus from chapter 12 onward. But that leaves out one of our greatest biblical motifs: the burning bush (Exodus chapter 3). This symbol is so important that the Conservative Movement took it as their "brand label", so to speak.

But do not despair! There is another early midrash collection on the book of Exodus called Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon, the Portion of Rabbi Shimon, which does cover the burning bush. This midrash collection was lost over time and was pieced together from quotations in other sources and manuscripts found in various places (e.g., Leningrad (sic...the city was called Leningrad when it was found)), Here is some of what it says about the burning bush:

"Now Moses was tending the flock and an Angel appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush, etc.(Exodus 3:1ff)"

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, appear from the high heavens and speak with Moses from within the bush? Because just as this bush was the thorniest of all the trees in the world, in that any bird that entered into it was torn limb from limb while trying to leave it, likewise the slavery of Israel in Egypt was the most oppressive slavery in the world.

....And how does one know from Scripture that the slavery of Israel was more oppressive than any slavery in the world? For it says in Scripture (here in Everett Fox's translation): "I have seen, yes, seen the affliction of my people that is in Egypt. (Exodus 3:7)" Why does Scripture says "see" twice?" Because after they drowned their sons in water, they would embed them in a building. (Mekhilta D'Rabbi Shimon, Maesechta D'Sanya 1:1)

Discussion Questions:

1. Usually, the burning bush is given a positive spin. Here, it is a symbol of slavery. According to this image, the slavery would stick to the slaves, regardless of how hard they tried to escape it. How does slavery/depression/addiction "stick" to a person? To what are we enslaved today? Is debt such a slavery? How can one safely escape?
2. The detail about enslavement in the World to Come strikes me as having some basis in knowledge about Egyptian culture that I haven't seen in other midrashim. According to the midrash, slaves were killed and then entombed with Egyptians to be their slaves in the afterlife. Does this strike you as realistic? Does anyone have

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information about the entombing of slaves in ancient Egypt? Certainly, the Chinese created servant statues with which to bury their king. What would slavery in the afterlife be? How could you escape?

Looking forward to hearing your insights!