

Rabbi Meir of Premishlan

Divrie Meir

Parshas Shemos

- **"A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8):**

The holy Rabbi, our teacher, Rabbi Meir of Premishlan, of blessed memory, said, as also mentioned in the book *Noam Megadim*, regarding the verse *"A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph"*:

"Whoever guards the covenant (brit), the kingdom is preserved for them" (Zohar, Part I, 93b). Such a person merits sovereignty, like Joseph the Righteous, for even the righteous are called kings, as it is said, "Who are kings? The rabbis" (Talmud, Gittin 62a).

And is there any greater sovereignty than the fact that "the righteous decree, and the Holy One, blessed be He, fulfills", and "the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees, and the righteous nullify", as it is taught (Moed Katan 16b): "Who rules over Me? The righteous."

And one who guards the covenant is called a "righteous one" (tzaddik).

"And the true penitent (ba'al teshuvah) is truly called a 'new king'."

This is the meaning of the verse, "A new king arose over Egypt"—referring to the harsh judgments, which the penitent seeks to nullify. The verse explains who this "new king" is:

It states, "who did not know Joseph"—that he did not previously guard his covenant (brit). However, through proper and sincere repentance (teshuvah), he became transformed into a "new king":

- **"And he saw, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed" (Exodus 3:2):**

This refers to grandchildren who are not the glory of their ancestors—those who have nothing of their own merit and survive only on the merit of their forefathers. Rabbi Meir of Premishlan said: "The bush" (sneh) is a barren tree, symbolizing such grandchildren who contribute nothing themselves, and yet 'the bush is not consumed.'

When someone of this nature was present at Rabbi Meir's table, and fish were served, the holy Rabbi remarked: "In the water, there are large fish and small fish. The large fish are very good, but the small ones—those, you chew and spit out."

To one of them, he once said: "Take for yourself a 'three-year-old heifer'" (Genesis 15:9). By this, he hinted at a carriage with three horses, implying that such individuals rely on external appearances and others' efforts. He further elaborated that such people act like a "thief" who takes from others and robs them of their own:

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[NOTE 1. The Burning Bush as a Metaphor for Inherited Merit

- The *sneh* (bush) symbolizes descendants who lack their own contributions or virtues ("barren tree"). They depend entirely on the merit of their ancestors, just as a bush may not bear fruit but remains intact despite the fire.
- This reflects a recurring theme in Jewish thought: the tension between personal effort and inherited spiritual standing (*zechut avot*).

2. The Fish Parable: Differentiating Merit

- Rabbi Meir's parable of the large and small fish further elaborates on this idea.
 - Large fish: Represent individuals of substance, those who contribute meaningfully to their communities or spiritual growth. They are nourishing and valuable.
 - Small fish: Symbolize those who bring little value and, despite being sustained by the "water" (the merit of their ancestors or environment), ultimately fail to stand on their own. These individuals require discernment—they are "chewed and spit out," suggesting they lack enduring worth or substance.

3. The Three-Year-Old Heifer and Reliance on Appearances

- Rabbi Meir's remark about the "three-year-old heifer" references someone who outwardly maintains the appearance of piety or status (e.g., traveling with a grand carriage or sporting the external symbols of a scholar) but lacks inner authenticity or effort.
- The criticism lies in relying on superficiality and the works of others rather than cultivating personal integrity and achievements. It aligns with the notion of "robbing others," where such individuals metaphorically "steal" honor or sustenance without contributing in return.

4. Moral Responsibility: From Inherited to Personal Merit

- Rabbi Meir's teachings challenge the individual to move beyond inherited merit. While *zechut avot* (ancestral merit) may provide a safety net, it is not a substitute for personal spiritual growth, moral effort, and contribution.

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- The burning bush, though protected and unconsumed, represents a precarious situation—remaining barren while benefiting from divine grace. It is a call to action, urging descendants to transform inherited potential into personal achievement.

In summary, Rabbi Meir's insights remind us of the delicate balance between gratitude for the spiritual inheritance we receive and the imperative to build our own legacy. It's a call to transcend passivity and actively engage in meaningful personal and communal growth. **END NOTE]**