

The Burning Question: A Play

By Rabbi Erin Hirsh

Please Note: *A guide to using this play is appended to the script.*

Host:¹ Welcome to the television show that asks the most important questions about the most important issues in our lives. This is . . . The BURNING QUESTION!

[Applause Person runs across stage holding up and waving the “APPLAUSE!” sign.]

After audience applauds:

Host: Our guests today are God –making a very rare TV appearance in the form of the Burning Bush – and God’s good friend, perhaps the most famous Shepherd of all time . . . our ancestor, Moses!

Let’s jump right in with the first Burning Question from our audience.

*[Host points to **Audience Member 1**, who should be raising hand eagerly.]*

Audience Member 1:

God, I’ve always wanted to know: how did you put the spark in the bush?

God: Every human being has a spark of the Divine in them. Some people call it the “God-Spark.” It is what makes you . . . you. It is your uniqueness and your creativity. If I can put a different spark in every single person, why does anyone think it would be hard to put a spark in a little bush?

Audience Member 2:

But God, I really want to know. How did you make the bush catch fire?

God: Magicians never share their secrets . . .

¹ Read the first line dramatically, it is presumably the line with which the Host begins the show every week.

Audience Member 3 *[calls out]:*

Well, how about turning Moses' staff into a snake? Was that just a trick or did you really make it happen?

God: Why is it that every time people have an opportunity to talk with Me they want to start with the flashy stuff? I don't even like to do tricks. I am really more present to you in the natural world than the supernatural world. I wish I had never had to use magic to get your attention.

Host: Well, for a Source of Divinity who doesn't like magic, you sure did a lot of magical things in the Torah . . . things that couldn't happen in nature. If you don't like magic, why did you do so much of that?

God: Well, I was younger in the time of the Torah. It's five thousand years later and I'm much wiser now. Today I have more faith in people. I am more patient, more subtle. I prefer to reach people through their own consciences – the voices in their hearts and minds that guide them to do one thing and not another.

Host: But in the story of the Burning Bush, you *did* make a bush catch fire but not burn. That's obviously something no person could do. So, why did you do it that way?

God: Well, Moses seemed very busy burying his head in the sand, ignoring Me.

Audience, can anyone explain to Me why do *so many* of you think you can ignore your own consciences and get away with it? (Shakes head back in forth slowly.) It never works.

The cast has a choice here.

*You can let **God's** question be rhetorical or the **Host** can actually let the audience try to answer **God's** question.*

Below is how that open conversation might be integrated:

Host: Audience, does anyone want to answer God? Do you think we people sometimes try to ignore the part of us that knows what the right thing to do is?

If no actual audience member replies,

Host: No? Ok, so let's turn back to Moses.

*If an actual audience member does reply, **Host** should seek an example of knowing the right thing to do but not doing it at all or at least right away.*

*Then **Host** should answer something to the effect that:*

Yes, it is sometimes easier to act like we don't know what the right thing to do is. But the part of us that really knows what the right thing to do is usually wins in the end.

That's partly what the job of religion is – to give us the help we need to do the good things even when they are hard.

Host: Now, back to Moses.

Host: Moses, before you encountered God at the Burning Bush, were you trying to bury your head in the sand and ignore what you knew to be a more Sacred or Holy choice?

Moses: No! I wasn't doing anything wrong at all. Tziporah and I were minding our own business. We were truly living the Midian Dream. We tended our sheep and loved our son.

Host: But maybe the Midian Dream wasn't the Dream you were supposed to be living. You can't pretend you didn't know you were an Israelite already. You had long since discovered that your nanny, Yohevet, was actually your birth mother and that the Pharaoh's daughter Batya was your adoptive mother.

Moses: What's your point?

Host: Moses, didn't it really feel more like a "dream" than like real life?

Moses: I still don't get what you're trying to say.

God: Mr. [or Ms.] Talk Show Host, may I cut in? None of my children can ever really and truly forget human suffering once they have seen it. Moses, you were far

away from the suffering of your sister, Miriam and your brother, Aaron, the suffering of all the other Israelites who were still enslaved in Egypt. But you could not really forget.

Moses: I loved Tzippi! She and our son and I had a wonderful life. I was happy, I was fulfilled.

God: Moses, I am a part of you. You cannot hide one part of yourself from another. Tell the audience your son's name.

Moses: What does THAT have to do with anything?

God: Moses, I know what I know. Tell them.

Moses: Ok, we call him Ger. His full name is Gershom.

Host: Gershom? As in Ger- *Sham*? Your son's name means a "Stranger There"?

Moses: Well, yes, his name is Gershom, and "a Stranger There" *is* technically what his name means, but Tzippi and I really just liked the sound – there's no deep significance behind his name.

Host: Moses, his name is in the Torah. We all know that – when it comes to Torah – there is nothing random. Everything has meaning.

Moses: So God, you're so smart. What is the significance to you?

God: Part of you always knew you weren't completely at home in Midian. Part of you couldn't forget that the Israelites were still slaves, still suffering.

More than anything else, believing in Me means² knowing that human beings all have inside them the instinct to try to make the world better, kinder and more just.

And you have that instinct in you Moses. It burns as brightly as the fire in that bush did.

Moses: So what was the whole deal with the fire about, if I already had this impulse in me?

² Read the rest of this sentence particularly slowly to give audience a chance to absorb it.

God: Audience, have any of you ever thought about what a bush that is on fire looks like?
How different do you think a bush that was on fire but not burning looked?

Host can take actual answers from audience. The answer you are looking for is that it would be hard to notice that something was on fire but not burning.

*Once you get that answer, **Moses** can continue with his next line, which is after this box.*

*If you don't get that answer from the audience, **God** should continue as follows:*

God: You've burned logs in fire pits or fireplaces, you've seen pictures of forest fires. It is NOT easy to notice if something is on fire AND burning. Your first thought is to assume that if something is on fire, it is burning!

THEN Moses can continue with his next line, which is after this box.

Moses: Hey, that's right. It actually wasn't so obvious. It really took me a minute to notice that the bush was on fire but not burning.

God: Yes, indeed. Many people experience Me in nature. Did you ever wonder why? It's because of nature's majesty, of course, but *also* because appreciating nature is kind of like praying. It takes being very calm and thoughtful and observant to really appreciate nature.

Moses: Oh, yeah . . . and when you start to notice everything around you, it really grounds you, and it gives you a perspective of how gigantic and complicated the world is and *that* helps you get perspective about how you fit in the world.

Host: So, Moses, you noticed that the bush was on fire but not burning. It sounds like God is saying that when you realized the bush wasn't actually burning you were really becoming aware that the world is filled with Holiness all the time. God was right there with you while you walked your sheep in the wilderness . . . it was just a matter of you noticing.

Moses: It sounds like it . . . but I never think of things that way. Ever since I stopped thinking I was an Egyptian prince, I have felt like an ordinary guy. I know that what happened to me actually could have happened to anyone.

Audience Member 4 *[calls out]:*

You, an ordinary guy? What's ordinary about you, Moses? I know I could never ever do any of the things you did.

Moses: Well, You heard God say it God's self. We all have inside us that God-Spark, that impulse to do good and make the world better.

Of course it's true that I have lived an extraordinary life, but, really, I am a pretty ordinary guy. There's nothing particularly great about me. I have had to deal with all kind of usual problems. I have a stutter. I have had to fight my shyness all my life.

God just pointed out that I have not always acted according to my best values. I try to do good, but I mess up. Once I got brave enough to stand up for a slave, and I accidentally went too far and killed someone. Some hero. I'll never forgive myself for that.

Audience Member 5 *[calls out]:*

That guy was a bully! Standing up to a bully is a great thing to do. It *has* to matter what you were trying to do. You didn't mean to kill him, you just were trying to stop him from hurting someone else.

Moses: Thank you, but in my heart I know it wasn't Godly. Sometimes I think of Life itself as the essence of God.

Host: Speaking of God, do any of our audience members have further questions?

Audience Member 6:

So Moses sees a bush that is on fire and not burning, and that got Moses' attention and made him realize that you were with him, God. So, was that the whole point of the story?

God *[Turning to the audience]:*

What do *you* think?

Host: Anybody, anybody? What do you believe was the most important lesson of the story of the Burning Bush?

Entertain any actual answers from the audience.

If no one answers OR after some people volunteer some answers:

Host: God has been gracious enough to come sit here with us in the form of the Burning Bush and answer our most “Burning Questions.”

Shortly after Moses encountered God at the Burning Bush, God told Moses that God’s name was “*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh.*” *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* means, “I am what I am” or “I will be what I will be.”

And so today, we leave you with *these* Burning Questions:

Who or What or When is God to *you*?

How do *you* experience God in the world?

How do you follow Moses’ example and act according to the Divine Sparks within you?

[Applause Person runs across stage holding up and waving the “APPLAUSE!” sign to indicate end of show.]

[God and Moses stand and bow or curtsy.]

A Guide to Using “The Burning Question” Play

By Rabbi Erin Hirsh

SUBJECT

This play is built upon the story of the Burning Bush (Exodus 3). However, the play does *not* actually teach the story. Instead, it assumes that the audience is already familiar with the story. For that reason, this play will work best as a culminating activity following the study of the Burning Bush story. (For example, after a family education program.)

The questions asked by the host and the audience members in this play are actually among those that I have most frequently heard children and adults ask when studying the Biblical text.

The script uses the text of the Burning Bush as a tool for exposing the audience to a series of non-supernatural and non-Biblical ways of understanding God.

CHARACTERS

GOD – in the form of the Burning Bush

- **Casting note:** It always “goes against type” to have God played by a female. Even if God is played by a male, avoid stereotypes like having God speak in a deep voice
- **Costume note:** God appears in the form of the Burning Bush and so actually needs a Burning Bush costume. One suggestion would be to dress in brown clothes covered in red, yellow, and orange streamers.

MOSES

- **Casting note:** Encourage the audience to “reimagine” Moses by not playing the stereotype of an old man with a long grey beard. Consider, for instance, playing Moses as a hippy.
- **Costume note:** You may still want to wear a robe and carry a staff in order to help establish who the character is.

TALK SHOW HOST

- **Casting note:** The person who plays this role must be able to do two important things at once. On one hand, the more “over-the-top” this character is, the better the play will work. (It might actually be better to play this part more like a Game show host than a Talk Show host.) At the same time, if you are going to include the participatory sections of this play, the person who takes on this role must be comfortable facilitating conversations for large groups/audiences and certainly with ad libbing.
- **Costume note:** The Host can really dress in any manner. My advice is just to make sure it is overly dramatic.

SUPPORTING ROLES

- **Audience Members 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6:** I recommend you assign these parts to teens or adults who would be watching the play anyhow. Try to vary who you choose by age and gender.
- **Applause Person:** This person will wave an “APPLAUSE!” sign to generate audience enthusiasm when the host welcomes the guests and audience and after God’s final lines at end of play.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Within the script I have embedded two sections designed for actual audience participation. These sections are designated within large boxes and include specific directions with which the cast needs to familiarize themselves in advance of the performance. The advantage of this section is that it will make the Talk Show seem more real to the audience and provide an opportunity for the audience members/ community to ask their own questions or to answer some questions posed to them.

PROPS

- Poster with the name of the Talk Show, “The Burning Question”
- Poster saying “APPLAUSE!”
- Microphone (real if possible, but even if in smaller space the Talk Show Host should have pretend mic to hold up to whichever character is speaking)

AGE APPROPRIATENESS

- The script is designed to be appropriate for elementary school age children and older.
- The parts of God, Moses, and the Host are written to be played by adults or teens.

LENGTH

A straight read-through of the script (including all lines but excluding time for audience participation) takes 12-15 minutes. It could reasonably take 30 minutes if you include the audience participation segments.

ORIGINS

This play was written as part of the Transformative Jewish Texts project of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. In the words of Rabbi Jeffrey Schein, RRC '77, Ph.D., the program coordinator, "The transformative text project brings together talented rabbinical students and committed rabbis and educators in Reconstructionist congregations. The goal is to remove all dusty library residue from a text so that it becomes a vital living force in the life of individual Jews and their communities."

On October 14, 2012, God and Moses were featured in a Talk Show appearance at Congregation Or Hadash. The Talk Show occurred near the end of a two hour family education program about the Burning Bush. In that Talk Show, the participants/audience spontaneously asked questions and the performers ad libbed their answers. It was a delightful program in which adults and children eagerly asked questions. In some ways, this play is an effort to enable other communities to recreate that experience. However, this play also takes the conversation in new directions. It deliberately uses the Burning Bush text – in which God is portrayed in vivid, supernatural terms – as an entrée to exploring non-supernatural ways of understanding God. Thanks to Rabbi Josh Waxman and rabbinical student Malka Packer for inspiring me during the original Talk Show.