

## A Turn for the Better

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It's an all too familiar image: an individual in distress calling out, seeking help, as person after person walks by, completely ignoring their plight. Many of us prefer to see ourselves as the exception, the one who would stop and offer a hand, but statistics paint a different picture. In social psychology, the bystander effect describes the direct inverse correlation between the size of a crowd and the likelihood that someone will step in and help in a moment of crisis. In other words, someone in distress is much more likely to receive support from a solitary passerby than from a large group gathered around them. It appears to be the case that human beings are much more willing to step up when we are alone.

In Parashat Shemot, it appears that Moses took conscious steps to operate as a lone bystander, taking action that seems unlikely had a larger crowd been present. Raised in Pharaoh's household, now an adult, Moses went out to walk among the Hebrew slaves as they labored. After witnessing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, "He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" ([Exod. 2:12](#)).

It was only after concluding that no other witnesses were present that Moses took action. One could debate his motivations: Was he making sure that no one would observe this violent action on his part? Was he checking to see if anyone else was preparing to step in and help? Commentaries suggest the former, and perhaps this moment is a perversion of the bystander effect: Moses acted alone both because he didn't want to be seen and because he realized there was no one else who would stop this beating.

This is not the only time Moses's life is altered by a decision to turn his head. After discovering that there was indeed a witness to his killing of the Egyptian, Moses fled to Midian, where he quickly (at least in the text) finds himself married to Tziporah, daughter of Jethro, herding his father-in-law's sheep through the wilderness. One such trek brought him to the base of Mount Horeb (also considered to be Sinai), where Moses encountered a bush that is aflame, but not consumed by the fire:

"I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight", Moses says, "why doesn't the bush burn up?" (3:3)

While before, when he made the choice to save his fellow Hebrew, he turned to and fro to be sure his actions would not be witnessed, this time he turned precisely in order to bear witness. And of course, it is this second decision to turn and notice that is the catalyst that launches the Exodus story and results in his leadership over the Israelite people for the next forty years.

Various commentaries seek to define the nature of Moses's turning at the Burning Bush. Did he move closer in order to inspect this oddity? Did he step farther away in order to take in the scene as a whole? Midrash Tanhuma ([Shemot 15:2](#)) relates a debate over *how much* Moses turned aside:

And Moses said: I will turn aside now, and see this great sight ([Exod. 3:3](#)). Rabbi Yohanan said that Moses took three steps forward [closer to the bush]. Rabbi Simeon the son of Lakish said he took no steps, but rather simply turned his neck to observe it. The Holy Blessed One said to him: Because you troubled to look, be assured you will merit that I shall reveal Myself unto you.

In other words, even the simple act of turning his neck a few degrees was enough for God to decide Moses was worthy of the prophetic messages he would soon receive, and the mantle of leadership that he would assume. It did not matter that he made a slight hesitation rather than a full detour; it was enough to open himself to an encounter that would change not only his life but the course of an entire people.

The message of this midrash is clear: sometimes a slight pivot is enough to lead to an entirely different destination, if only we will ourselves to make that shift. Twice in this parashah, Moses found this to be true. What would it take for us, then, to overpower the phenomenon that prevents too many of us from stepping off course, and to allow ourselves to turn aside, to truly notice that which is unnatural or unjust, regardless of whether or not others join us? Perhaps if we allow the unexpected to penetrate our consciousness just enough, we can throw off the identity of bystander and allow the reverberations of that tiny motion to propel us in changing the course of history.

*This commentary originally appeared in 2018.*