

Parashat Shmot God Responds to those who Respond to God: Understanding Moses' Pivot to the Burning Bush
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וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה	Now Moses was shepherding
אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוּ	the flock of Yitro his father-in-law,
כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן	priest of Midian.
וַיְנַהֲג אֶת הַצֹּאן	He led the flock
אֲחֵר הַמִּדְבָּר	behind the grazing area,
וַיָּבֹא אֶל הַר הָאֱלֹהִים	and came to the mountain of God,
תְּרֵבָה.	to Horev.
וַיֵּרָא מַלְאָךְ ה' אֵלָיו	And God's angel was seen by him
בְּלֶבֶת אֵשׁ	as the flame of a fire
מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה	out of the midst of a bush.
וַיֵּרָא וַהֲגֵה	He saw: now here,
הַסִּנֵּה בֹעֵר בָּאֵשׁ	the bush is burning with fire,
וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינָנו אֹכֵל.	but the bush is not consumed!
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה	Moses said:
אֲסֶרֶה נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה	Now let me pivot that I may see
אֶת הַמִּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה	this great sight—
מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה.	why does the bush not burn up?
וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת	God saw that he pivoted to see,
וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים	so God called to him
מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה	out of the midst of the bush;
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה	he said: Moses! Moses!
וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הִנְנִי. (שְׁמִי: ג. א-ד.)	He said: Here I am. (Exod. 3:1-4)

Incensed by the brutality of an Egyptian taskmaster against one of his brothers, Moses smote the brute and killed him. He escaped Pharaoh's retribution and fled to Midian.¹ After protecting harassed women at a well, he was invited to the home of Yitro, priest of Midian, father of one of the women, Tzippora. Moses marries her. They have a child, Gershom. Prior to the Burning Bush episode, we learn that Pharaoh has died. News of this world historical event would have reached Moses. He now has to decide: **Should I stay, or should I go?**² He has many reasons to **stay** in Midian: family, livelihood, security. He has many reasons to **go** back to Egypt: his people, their suffering, his sense that he was destined to be more than a shepherd. Precisely now he takes his father-in-law's flock **behind the grazing area**.³ By traversing this boundary between grazeable and non-grazeable land, the text is symbolically taking us from the verdant part of Moses' life - family, vocation, honored status as son-in-law to the priest - to a zone of barren emptiness. With the sheep braying in the background, he goes to



Moses Adores God in the Burning Bush (detail), James Tissot, ca. 1896-1902. Jewish Museum

the Mountain of God. Commentators have suggested that he goes there to scout other possible grazing territory. It's more complicated than that. He has to make a fateful decision and he needs to be alone. He can step beyond the "grassline" with the confidence that he will be able to take care of the sheep even in a zone of desolation beyond it, a foreshadowing of his role as Israel's shepherd in the desolate wilderness. The mountain is where heaven and earth meet. It has commanded his curiosity on previous shepherding excursions. In this moment of self-definition, he is drawn to the mountain, perhaps out of curiosity or perhaps out of a desire to connect to The Being That Resides in Heaven Above The Mountain. As he approaches the mountain, God's angel-messenger appears in a fire in the **sneh-bush**, which served as a type of firewall to the mountain. This reminds us of another fiery apparition at the beginning of Genesis: **the keruvim-winged-sphinxes and the fiery-flashing, ever turning sword** that blocked the way to the Tree of Life east of Eden, (Gen. 3:24). As Moses goes beyond his habitual grazing area and attempts to take a step into the desolate unknown region of his life, he has to confront the angel-messenger at the boundary in the firewall. Fires are spellbinding but also lethal. Instead of turning back, he stops and gazes. He notices that the bush strangely does not turn to ash. This is a **great sight** to him and he **pivots** towards it. That's the moment that God calls out to him: **Moses! Moses!** Read this verse closely:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה	And God saw that Moses pivoted to see and God called out to him, from the bush.
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The **pivoting**, the **turning-of-one's-body-and-setting-out-in-a-potentially-lethal-direction** is what prompts God to

¹ Next of kin can avenge a death caused by manslaughter. As sovereign, Pharaoh is symbolic "next of kin" to the taskmaster and could "lawfully" kill Moses. Moses therefore fled to exile to remain out of Pharaoh's reach.

² Cue the **Clash**. Now that Pharaoh is dead, Moses can return from exile since there is no one to avenge the death of the taskmaster, and the death of the sovereign heralds a general amnesty for manslaughterers. God says this explicitly to Moses in the next chapter: **Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life have died** (Exod. 4:19).

³ I am using **grazing area** for **מִדְבָּר** as opposed to **wilderness** or **wasteland** following its precise biblical meaning as discussed by renowned biblical botanist, Noga Hareuveni. He cites Rabbi David Kimhi: **מָקוֹם מְרֻעָה - אֶת הַבְּהֵמָה יִקְרָא מִדְבָּר בֵּין סִמּוֹךְ לַעִיר בֵּין רְחוֹק מִן הָעִיר - a place to pasture animals is called midbar whether it is close to the town or far from it.** (Radak on Josh. 8:15).

Reading this text in the most precise manner: Moses is grazing the sheep and moves beyond the grazing area, the "grassline" or "rangeland boundary" meaning he is now in a non-grazeable part of the area, and he has left the sheep behind, albeit temporarily. He is alone, on rugged vegetation-less terrain.

call him. **God's call is a response to Moses' response.** The Rabbis interpret this scene frame by frame.

§ רבי יוחנן אמר: חמש פסיעות פסע משה באותה שעה שנאמר: **אָסַר-הָ נָא וְאַרְאֵה.** § רבי שמעון בן לקיש אמר: **הָפַךְ פָּנָיו וְהִבִּית** **שְׁנֵאמַר: נִרְאָה ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת.** כִּינֵן שֶׁהִבִּית בּוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא **אָמַר: נֹאֵה זֶה לְרֵעוֹת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.** (שמו"ר ב:ו)

§ R. Yohanan said: **Moses took five steps at that moment.** As it is said, **I will pivot [asura] now and see.** [אָסַר = אָסַר + ה' meaning I will go 'ה' = 5. I will go five steps.]

§ R. Shimon ben Lakish said: **He turned his face and looked, as it is written, And God saw that he pivoted to see. When Moses saw it [the bush], the Holy One Blessed be He said, This one is beautiful to shepherd Israel.** (Shmot Rabbah 2:6)

The Body and The Face: § To R. Yohanan **אָסַר-I will pivot** means **actual physical movement towards something.** The Torah could have easily used a simpler form of the word, **אָסַר** (without the 'ה') for **I will pivot**, but because it used the unusual **אָסַר** with the extra 'ה' we have to pay closer attention. 'ה' stands for the number '5'. **אָסַר-ה'** therefore means, **I will pivot-'5'.** Or **I will bring my whole body 5 steps closer to the mysterious fire.** Moses is responding to the fire by showing that he is **"all-in"** and when God sees that, God responds to him. § For Resh Lakish it's all about the face. Moses **turns his face** to the fire, and this is a revelation to God! **Moses reveals his face to God!** While we are so used to the language of God **showing and hiding His face** as expressions of blessing and punishment, here a human being reveals his face to God, and God is over-whelmed by its beauty, majesty and mystery. We all react to the human face with a feeling of ethical responsibility and inarticulable wonder. **The face,** says Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas, **speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation.** Something like that is happening here. God sees the beauty of Moses' face and concludes that Moses will be the perfect shepherd for Israel. Moses' face will captivate them. Moses' face will reflect God's presence to them. Moses' face will **invite the people to a relation** and inspire them with ethical responsibility.



R. Yohanan:	Moses steps towards the Body.	Body = Moses' total commitment.
Resh Lakish:	Moses turns towards the Face.	Face = Moses' invitation to relation.

Empathy: When we are first introduced to Moses we recall that he is stirred by the people's suffering. **וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּרְאֵהוּ אֱלֹהִים** **וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אָחִיו וַיִּרְאֵהוּ בְּסִבְלָתָם** **Now it was some years**

later, Moshe grew up; he went out to his brothers and saw their burdens (Exod. 2:11). There was something that propelled him. This Midrash elaborates on Moses' empathy:

נִרְאָה ה' כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת רֵאָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּמִשְׁה שֶׁסָּר מִעֲסָקָיו לְרֵאוֹת בְּסִבְלָתָם לְפִיכָךְ וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה. (שמו"ר א:כז)

God saw that he pivoted to see. God saw that Moses pivoted from his own activities to see their (his people's) burdens, therefore God called him from the sneh-bush.

Shmot Rabbah 1:27

God's call to Moses was a response Moses' empathic response, a characteristic that he demonstrated years before when he **pivoted** from his normal activities to **see** the suffering of his brethren. This idea is developed further in this midrash, a pun on the word **סָר**.

אָמַר רבי יצחק מהו כִּי סָר לְרֵאוֹת? אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: **סָר וְזָעַף** הוּא זֶה לְרֵאוֹת בְּצַעְרָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם לְפִיכָךְ רָאוּי הוּא לְהִיּוֹת רוּעָה עֲלֵיהֶן. (שמו"ר ב:ו)

R. Yitzhak said: What does "he pivoted to see" mean? The Holy One blessed be He said, This one is dispirited and sullen when seeing the suffering of Israel in Egypt. Therefore, he is worthy of being a shepherd to them.

(Shmot Rabbah 2:6)

R. Yitzhak connects the word **סָר-pivot** to its rare homonym, **סָר-dispirited**, which is paired with the word **זָעַף-sullen** (this word-pair, **סָר וְזָעַף**, occurs only twice in the entire Bible: 1 Kings 20:43 and 21:4). Moses is not only someone with deep empathy, but someone who is deeply affected by the plight of the Israelites. Therefore, God calls him. To philosophers like Ovadia Sforno, Moses **pivoted** in order to **להתבונן בדבר-to speculate on the thing (the fire).** To the mystics **סָר in gematria is 260 which is 10 times the numerical value of God's name, 26.** Therefore Moses experienced a special mystical manifestation of God's presence. But beyond lofty intellectual curiosity and rarefied mystical desire there is something very basic going on here. God has tried to break through to unique individuals before. The people of Israel hold on to the feint echoes of God's words to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but have had no direct contact with God in the centuries since. Moses lives in a world thick with human power and cruelty, a world devoid of God's presence or God's name. And here is God, who wants to break through to human beings, but no-one responds to him. No-one that is, except for one extraordinary individual: Moses. At this crucial moment in his life, when he has to decide who he is, he steps away from his flock, goes into a zone of emptiness, a zone in which there is no human power and no civilization, and there, a lonely God in need of humanity takes a chance on him in the form of a fiery bush. God asks himself: **Will he look at me? Will he pay attention to me?** And Moses **pivoted.** He turned his body. He turned his face. He looked. He responded to God when no one else did. And because of that, God responded to him. And because of that, human history was never the same. Shabbat Shalom!

Day 470. We pray for the speedy release of the hostages. May God protect them and their families as they endure the torture of waiting for their return. May God comfort the bereaved, heal the wounded and shield Israel from

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