



Eighty Years of Prayer: Moshe's Empathic Curiosity

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Is it worth persisting in prayer, even if we aren't answered right away? What does it mean to pray for something for years—or even decades? Moshe can serve as one model for addressing these questions. Some of his prayers were answered immediately, but one of his prayers received no response until he turned 80. Yet it was this prayer, when finally answered, that moved his life forward to the next stage.

In Va'Era, we learn that Moshe was 80 years old when he prepared to speak to Pharaoh for the first time. Moshe is one of the oldest prophets in our tradition.¹ Why was he so old when he began this journey?²

¹ See Ibn Ezra's comments to Exodus 7:7.

² Abravanel offers one answer in his comments to Exodus 7:7: “וספר הכתוב שהיו משה ואהרן זקנים באים בימים” / Scripture enumerates how old Moshe and Aharon were when they went on this mission because it is not fitting to enter the king's court with a serious matter when one is young and hot-blooded. Rather it is for the elders, who have acquired wisdom, and are fitting for this divine mission.” Similarly, R. David Zvi Hoffmann notes in his comment to Exodus 7:7 that only elders, who have life experience, can be entrusted with the difficult work of bringing redemption: “קביעת גיל זו נחוצה כדי ללמדנו, שזקנים ובעלי ניסיון היו האישים שבידיהם הפקיד ה' את המלאכה הקשה של הגאולה.”



A *midrash* explains the significance of mentioning Moshe's age at this point in the narrative. He is a model for someone who has waited 80 years before his prayer was answered:

Midrash HaGadol to Exodus 7:7, p. 112

מדרש הגדול שמות ז:

There are some prayers that are answered after 80 years, [as we learn] from Moshe: "Moshe was 80 years old" (Exodus 7:7).
יש תפלה שהיא נענית לשמונים שנה, ממשה, "ומשה בן שמונים שנה" (שמות ז, ז).

This *midrash* lists other biblical characters whose prayers were answered after certain intervals of time: Avraham after 100 years; Sarah after 90 years; Yitzhak after 60 years (all for a child); Yonah after 3 days in the fish. The *midrash* concludes with another prayer of Moshe, that was answered immediately:

There are some prayers that don't even finish leaving the mouth of the one who said it before it is answered, [as we learn] from Moshe, as it is written: "God said to Moshe: Why are you screaming to me? [Tell Israel to march forward!]" (Exodus 14:15)
יש תפלה שלא הספיקה מפי אומרה עד שנענית, ממשה, דכתיב "ויאמר ה' אל משה מה תצעק אלי" (שמות יד, טו).

At the moment when Pharaoh is bearing down on the Jewish people, Moshe's prayer for salvation is answered immediately. God instructs Moshe to stop praying and command Israel to march through the sea, which God will split. The *midrash* also mentions the prayer Moshe utters to save his sister Miriam from leprosy: "God, please heal her now" (Numbers 12:13). Sometimes Moshe's prayers are answered with no waiting period.

But, says the *midrash*, one prayer of Moshe took 80 years for an answer. What is the prayer Moshe waited so long for God to answer? The *midrash* is not clear on that point. Whereas one could argue Avraham, Sarah, and Yitzhak were waiting their whole lives for a child, for most of



his life, Moshe does not seem to be focused on bringing deliverance. When Moshe is a shepherd in Midian, he is simply not concerned with the fortunes of his people back in Egypt.

And yet, the *midrash* claims, Moshe was praying for **something**; waiting his whole life for **something**. Perhaps Moshe was himself unable to articulate the nature of this lifelong prayer; he was simply praying for something inchoate. Only in hindsight did he realize that the encounter with God at the burning bush—and the beginning of the process of redemption—was the answer to his prayer.

In my experience, the focus of prayer isn't always clear upfront; sometimes it is an unfolding process in which we eventually understand what we were praying for. I often find myself praying with a general stance of "Answer me," even though I can't quite articulate what specifically I want God to answer. The prayer itself is for God to help me realize what this prayer could be about.³

So we can only guess at what Moshe's 80-year prayer, which is eventually answered, might be. But I would like to offer a suggestion, based on Moshe's state of mind in his initial encounter with God at the burning bush, when he was 80. That scene begins when Moshe decides to turn aside and look at the wonder that is the bush:

Exodus 3:3

Moshe said: Let me turn aside and see this great sight;
why won't the bush burn?

שמות ג:ג

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הַמֵּרְאָה
הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא-יִבָּעַר הַסִּנֵּה:

³ See Proverbs 16:1, quoted in our High Holiday liturgy: לְאִדָּם מַעֲרֻכֵי-לֵב וַיְמַה' מַעֲנֶה לְשׁוֹן. God is the force that helps us articulate our thoughts into words.



In the midrashic tradition, Moshe's stepping toward the bush is actually a specific walking forward of three steps:

Shemot Rabbah 2:6, ed. Shinan, p. 116

שמות רבה (שנאן) ב:ו

R. Yoḥanan said: Moshe took three steps at that moment, as ר' יוחנן אמר: ג' פסיעות פסע משה באותה שעה, שנאמר: אסרה נא ואראה. it says: "Let me turn aside and see" (three words in Hebrew).

R. Yoḥanan assigns a physical step to each of the three words: אסרה נא ואראה. Moshe steps off the path to investigate something he notices. He turns aside, and moves closer to the object of his curiosity.⁴

Moshe's stepping forward is not about pleading or gratitude, but about curiosity; "מדוע - why?" is the operative word in this scene. Moshe notices something and wants to learn more about it. Indeed, God identifies this attribute in Moshe as the critical one needed in order to lead the people. As this *midrash* continues:

"God saw that Moshe had turned aside to look"—since "וירא ה' כי סר לראות" - כיון שהביט בו Moshe had looked at it, the Holy Blessed One said: This הקדוש ברוך הוא, אמר: נאה זה לרעות את ישראל one is fitting to shepherd Israel.

At this point in the Torah, we are just prior to the encounter between God and Moshe that initiates Moshe's real spiritual journey. But it is catalyzed by this step forward. Moshe is curious, and this is the most important trait in the leader who will take the Jewish people to freedom.

⁴ In the next *midrash*, R. Yehoshua ben Levi claims that Moshe actually steps backwards in this moment.



Why does God value this trait specifically in a leader? Only leaders who wonder about things are open to change and new ideas. Leaders who are stuck with one view of the world, even based in important values, seem less equipped for successful tenures.⁵ But also: people who wonder are people who notice and see things beyond themselves. Another *midrash* gives voice to this trait:

Midrash Tanhuma (Buber) Shemot 13, p. 4b

מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת שמות יג

The Holy Blessed One said [to Moshe]: You were troubled enough to see, I swear I will redeem through you.

א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא נצטערתה לראות, חייך
שאגלה עליך

Moshe allows himself to be affected by his surroundings, to be troubled enough to see. He is not just curious—he is empathically curious.

Perhaps the prayer that Moshe was uttering all his life was the prayer of wonder. Only when he reaches the age of 80 do these prayers—moments of curiosity—yield the beginning of an actual relationship with God. After all, relationships often begin with a moment of noticing the other. When I start to ask questions out of curiosity, I demonstrate my capacity for new understandings and connections.

In our Amidah, we also begin by stepping forward three steps toward God's presence. One orientation to the beginning of the Amidah is this: coming closer to God with a stance of curiosity and wonder. The stepping forward can be experienced as the physical instantiation of curiosity and wonder. But also, coming closer to God having seen the troubles of those around me and being curious about them.

⁵ See the example of Eliyahu, who does not change his evaluation of the children of Israel, even after God reveals Godself in the "still small voice." Eliyahu says exactly the same thing before and after this encounter; he is not changed (I Kings 19:9, 14). Immediately God tells Eliyahu to appoint Elisha as prophet in his stead (I Kings 19:19). See Alex Israel, *I Kings: Torn in Two* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2013), pp. 263-267.



And in that moment of stepping forward, it is possible that inchoate prayers I have been saying start to take some shape. This is a process that may take many years, of understanding what it is we are curious about, and what it is we are really praying for. But, if Moshe can serve as our model, it is a process that moves forward, eventually yielding a more focused relationship with God, and our fellow humans.

