



Repetition in Prayer: Constancy, Urgency, and Love

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There are many instances in our prayers where we repeat phrases, paragraphs, or whole sections. What is the significance of repetition in prayer?

In Parashat Vayikra, God calls to Moshe (ויקרא) and then speaks to him (וידבר). Why does God use two different verbs to begin speaking to Moshe? A *midrash* on Vayikra 1:1 connects this pattern of God calling Moshe before speaking to the moment of the burning bush (Exodus 3:4), where God also calls (ויקרא) and then speaks (ויאמר):

Sifra Dibbura de-Nedavah, ed. Weiss, p. 3b

What is the proof in the Torah that all of God's calls to Moshe began with "Moshe, Moshe"?
Because it says: "God called to him from the bush and said: 'Moshe, Moshe.'" The Torah didn't need to write "and said" [since it already said: "God called."]
So why did the Torah add "and said"? To teach that every time God called to Moshe, it began "Moshe, Moshe."

ספרא דבורא דנדבה פרשה א פרק א

אות י
ומנין שכל הקריאות היו משה משה?
תלמוד לומר "ויקרא אליו אלקים מתוך הסנה ויאמר משה משה" - שאין ת"ל ויאמר.
ומה תלמוד לומר ויאמר? מלמד שכל הקריאות היו משה משה.



The *midrash* concludes that just as God called Moshe at the burning bush by doubling his name—“Moshe, Moshe”—so, too, every time God spoke to Moshe, including in the opening of Vayikra, God doubled his name.

What is the force of God’s doubling Moshe’s name? Our midrashic tradition offers a few possibilities. The first is a comment about Moshe’s character:

“Moshe, Moshe”: He was Moshe before [God] spoke to him, and he is Moshe after [God] spoke to him. "משה משה" - הוא משה עד שלא נדבר עמו, הוא משה משנדבר עמו.

In this understanding, the repetition of Moshe’s name is meant to tell us something about Moshe’s constancy. Moshe’s name did not change even after God revealed Himself to him. One could have imagined that Moshe would be fundamentally altered by the encounter with God. But in reality, the essence of Moshe remained the same, before and after God spoke to him. In our quest for connection to God through prayer and other means, we might imagine that we will fundamentally change as a person as a result of that interaction. Perhaps God’s revelation would mean we forget our old character and identity completely and become someone entirely new.¹ But this approach sees the goal of the encounter with God to become more fully our existing self. Moshe remains Moshe.

In one sense, this might seem disappointing. Isn’t a divine encounter meant to alter us entirely, to change the very essence of our being? At the same time, there is something

¹ Compare R. Joseph Soloveitchik’s understanding of teshuva as a process of “self-creation. The severing of one’s psychic identity with one’s previous ‘I’, possessor of a new consciousness...” Joseph Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983), p. 110. See also Rambam Hilkhhot Teshuvah 2:4.



comforting in this aspect of the connection. God is not looking to entirely reform us into a new being; rather God is looking to deepen the traits already existing within us.²

In the case of Moshe, God never changes his name. He literally remains Moshe throughout his life. But many other biblical figures emerge from a divine encounter with a new name, such as Avram becoming Avraham. Perhaps those are examples of a change in character as a result of talking with God? And yet, there is a tradition that even when Avram's name was changed to Avraham, he remained true to his original identity. Using the same language as the *midrash* above with Moshe, a different *midrash* reports:

Tosefta Berakhot 1:14, ed. Lieberman, p. 5³

He is Avram before [God] spoke to him, and he is
Avram after God spoke with him.

תוספתא ברכות (ליברמן) א:יד

הוא אברם עד שלא נדבר עמו והוא אברם
משנדבר עמו

Even though Avram's relationship to the people of the world changes with the addition of the letter to his name,⁴ his relationship to himself and his core values, such as justice,⁵ remains constant.

² A *midrash* notes a similar dynamic with Bezalel, the builder of the *mishkan*. God "filled Bezalel with wisdom" (Exodus 31:3). Tanhuma VaYakhel 2 notes that Bezalel already had wisdom within him, God was simply increasing it, deepening who he was in essence: "...When the Holy Blessed One sees a person with the spirit of wisdom, God fills them up. This is the meaning of 'I will fill him with the spirit [of wisdom]'—for he already had [wisdom]."

³ Note some texts read Avraham instead of Avram. See Lieberman's notes on p. 5. But compare Talmud Bavli Megillah 11a: "'Avram is Avraham' (I Chronicles 1:27)—he was righteous from his beginning to his ending." This emphasizes that Avram remains constant in his righteousness. Adding a letter doesn't fundamentally alter the original letters in the name, which remain, even as a letter is added to his name.

⁴ He is no longer just related to the people of Aram, but rather the father of many nations; see Talmud Bavli Berakhot 13a.

⁵ See Talmud Bavli Megillah 11a.



This constancy is not only about the people who connect to God, but also God Godself. Another midrash uses similar language when God's name is repeated in the recitation of the 13 Attributes:

Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 17b

תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יז:

ה' ה' - אני הוא קודם שיחטא האדם, ואני הוא
 לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה.
 "YHVH, YHVH" (Exodus 34:6)—I am [God] before a person
 sins, and I am [God] after a person sins and does *teshuvah*.

In this view of God, God does not become fundamentally wrathful as a result of our sins. In other words, God isn't altered by our behavior. Rather, God is constant in being a gracious and merciful God.⁶

These midrashic traditions emphasize that the point of the divine-human encounter is not to change the fundamental nature of one or both of the parties, but instead to remind each to stay true to their essence. It is that essence which forms the basis for the encounter in the first place, and is not meant to be radically altered as a result of the dialogue. Deepening one's essence and returning to it more faithfully is a very different outcome than rewriting it and completely changing. God wants us to be the best versions of ourselves, not people other than who we are—and we want the same for God.

The *midrash* from the Sifra offers a second understanding of the phrase "Moshe, Moshe":

"משה משה" ... לשון חבה, ולשון
 זירוז.
 "Moshe, Moshe"... [this is] the language of love, and the language
 of urgency.⁷

⁶ Compare Bereshit Rabbah 37:4, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 346: "'YHVH is our God' (Psalm 105:7)—God's mercy is forever."

⁷ See also Bereshit Rabbah 56:7, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 244; Midrash Shmuel 9:7, ed. Lifschitz, p. 38. For the sense of urgency specifically, see Shemot Rabbah 2:6, ed. Shinan, p. 116, which compares the call to someone



In this view, when God repeats Moshe's name, God is using repetition in a relational manner. One possibility is that the repetition expresses love (חיבה). God isn't satisfied by speaking Moshe's name only once. Like a lover who relishes reciting the beloved's name over and over again, God says "Moshe, Moshe" because God loves Moshe. In addition, God may be reciting Moshe's name over and over again because there is an urgency (זירוז) to the message God wants to share. The repetition is a way of getting Moshe's attention and making him understand that what is coming next is critical to listen to and act upon.⁸

This understanding of the meaning of repetition might help with certain moments of our traditional prayers in which we repeat lines or concepts over and over. Over the years, I have wondered why certain phrases in our prayers must be repeated—either entire prayers, such as the Amidah, or phrases that are similar, such as the praise words in the Kaddish, or even the 13 Attributes themselves, which are repeated multiple times in Selihot and Yom Kippur. What is the point of saying these words over and over again?

In light of this exploration of repeating Moshe's name, perhaps we can look at repetition in a different way. Repeating words—and especially names—comes with a certain sense of intimacy and purpose. When I say my beloved's name over and over, I am deepening that relationship in an intense manner. My beloved may need to feel seen and desired, and repeating their name helps convey that feeling. Similarly, when we call out using God's name

who asks someone else to take a burden off their shoulder (and speaks to God's suffering with Israel—see Shinan's note to line 34). Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 8, ed. Enelow, p. 150-1, demonstrates how the doubling of Moshe's name allows Moshe to have intimate access to God's realm.

⁸ Compare the urgency by which the angel speaks to Avraham in trying to stop him from sacrificing Yitzhak in Midrash Vayosha (Otzar HaMidrashim, ed. Eisenstein, p. 148): "Why did the angel cry out Avraham twice? Because Avraham was hurrying [to act] and the angel was screaming at him, like a person who screams and says: 'Ploni, Ploni—what are you doing?!'" Here the force of the call is stop Avraham from acting—not to take new action—but the urgency is similar. Contrast Louis Finkelstein's interpretation of this *midrash*, in which the first mention of Moshe's was for love, and the second was for urgency. Louis Finkelstein, *Sifra de-Vei Rav* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990), vol. 4, p. 14.



over and over again, we are deepening that sense of connection and relationship (לשון חיבה). And when we feel a certain sense of urgency to our words, we repeat them to make sure they are heard (לשון זירוז).

One ancient example of repeating words in prayer is in the recitation of Psalm 118, the height of Hallel (Psalms 113-118). The Mishnah (Sukkah 3:11) already notes that there was a practice to repeat the words of this Psalm.⁹ Rashi explains that much of Psalm 118 is already comprised of certain repeating phrases (verses 1-20), so we are just doubling the remaining phrases (verses 21-29) to have the experience of the entire Psalm as a performed repetition.¹⁰ This Psalm—and its recitation with repetition—becomes an ode to our love of God and all that God has done for us.

The deepest relationships in the Tanakh between a person and God include a moment in which God calls out to the person by doubling their name. This indicates that God is looking to connect—not to fundamentally change them, but to deepen already existing aspects of their character. In this view, our repeating of God's name is also meant to emphasize how God's mercy is constant, ultimately faithful despite the inconsistencies in our behavior. The repeating of names is also an indication of an emotional state: a state of love, and a sense of urgency. Our repeated prayers—mirroring God's repeated callings to Moshe—give expression to those emotions. And through these repetitions, our connection to God deepens.

⁹ See Rabbi's practice in Talmud Bavli Sukkah 39a to double phrases.

¹⁰ Rashi to Sukkah 38a, s.v. לכפול.

