

# BYSTANDER EFFECT



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT SHEMOT  
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In 1964, Kitty Genovese was stabbed and killed in Kew Gardens, Queens. The New York Times reported that 38 witnesses saw or heard the attack, and nobody did anything to help. This article (which was later shown to be exaggerated) motivated social psychologists John M. Darley and Bibb Latané to attempt to better understand why people did not help. In a series of experiments, Darley and Latané demonstrated what they termed the bystander effect. People are less likely to help someone in distress when there are other people present. Over the years, several different explanations were presented for this phenomenon, including assuming someone else will act (diffusion of responsibility), uncertainty about if and how to act, fear of physical or social repercussions, amongst others.

In the second chapter of *Sefer Shemot* we are presented with Moshe's brief, yet powerful origin story. After being saved and raised by the daughter of Paroh, Moshe matures ("*Vayigdal*") and observes the scene of Egyptian slavery. His first reaction is to notice the pain and the plight of the *Ivri* slaves ("*vayar be-sivlotam*"). Rashi explains that he notices and empathizes with their distress. Rabbi Yochanan Luria, indicates that this wasn't just a cognitive or emotional exercise for Moshe. Rather, he was actively looking to help others and protect the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor. What follows in the narrative are three successive stories that demonstrate this core character trait of Moshe.

First, Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating an *Ivri*, "turns this way and that way, sees that there is no man" and kills the Egyptian (*Shemot* 2:12). One way to understand Moshe's behavior is that he turned in each direction to make sure that nobody would see him so he wouldn't get caught. Yet, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg offers a completely different explanation which changes the way we understand the whole scene. He suggests the Egyptian was actually hitting the *Ivri* in the presence of other *Ivri* slaves. Moshe turns in each direction not to see if there is anybody else present, but to see if any of the other *Ivrim* who *are* present would stand up and defend his brother against the Egyptian. Moshe sees that there is no "*ish*," no person of substance or stature who will act in this situation. When everyone else was a bystander, Moshe takes action and defends the *Ivri*.

In the second story, Moshe observes two *Ivrim* fighting and Moshe intervenes to stop them. The details of the fight are unclear within the *pesukim* and commentators offer differing views to fill in the gaps. Rabbi Isaac Arama assumes that both parties bare responsibility for the fight and argues that Moshe is demonstrating an essential leadership quality, namely, a desire and ability to step in and adjudicate conflict. In contrast, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar suggests that this scene is one of a perpetrator and a victim, paralleling the earlier story with the Egyptian. Moshe intervenes, once again demonstrating his ability to act for the sake of the oppressed.

In the final story, Moshe approaches a well in Midyan and sees shepherds harassing a group of young girls. Moshe sees the injustice and saves the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor. What makes this third story even more compelling is that it comes on the heel of Moshe paying the direct price for intervening in the first and second stories. Moshe was not rewarded for his courageous behavior but had to run for his life because he intervened. Yet, confronted with a third injustice, he doesn't let history get in the way of doing what is right.

Rabbi Isaac Karo points out that there is a powerful progression in each of these stories. While each intervention is impressive, the first is perhaps the most understandable as Moshe is protecting one of his own from an outsider. The second story offers more justification for inaction as the perpetrator is a peer, yet he acts anyways. Finally, even in the third encounter, where both parties are strangers and Moshe could have easily just minded his own business and walk away, Moshe steps in and saves them.

With these three stories, the Torah provides us a paradigm of what it means to be an upstander instead of a bystander. There may be many psychological factors that can lead to inaction in such scenarios. Yet, despite those factors, when there are those around us in need, we are called on to emulate Moshe and intercede on their behalf.

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