

The Ability to Notice:

Moses and the Burning Bush

What are the qualities and conditions needed in order for us to notice that which is around us? What can we learn from Moses and his ability to see and notice what others did not? In this source sheet, we explore these questions.

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Exodus 2:11-13



שמות ב:יא-יג

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He **saw** an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

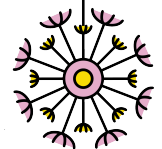
He **turned this way and that and, seeing** no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

When he went out the next day, **he found two Hebrews fighting**; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?"

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיַּגְדֵּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אֶחָיו
וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרָא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכָּה
אִישׁ־עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו:

וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּךְ אֶת־הַמִּצְרִי
וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַחֹל:

וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וְהָנָה שְׁנֵי־אֲנָשִׁים עִבְרִים
נֹצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָרָשָׁע לָמָּה תִכֶּה רֵעֲךָ:



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Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of G-d. An angel of the Eternal appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He **gazed**, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must **turn aside to look** at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the Eternal **saw** that he had turned aside to look, G-d called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am."

וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֶנּוּ כֹהֵן מִדְיָן
וַיִּנְהֲג אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר
הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵב:

וַיֵּרָא מִלֶּאךָ ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִבַּת־אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה
וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינֶנּוּ
אֲכָל:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה־נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הַמַּרְאֶה
הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא־יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה:

- What qualities does Moses possess that enable him to notice things?
- How do these qualities and abilities play out practically in early instances of his life?

Tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro: It was necessary to state that he was a shepherd because the majority of prophets receive their prophecy while shepherding. Prophecy requires solitude.... By these means, his thoughts will (be preoccupied with) the emergence of G-d, may G-d be blessed, until he is (spiritually) awakened by Heaven and the spirit of G-d. This won't happen if he dwells in his house or if he does work other than in the field. It only happens for the shepherd who has a lot of unoccupied time.

The vision of the burning bush appeared to Moses alone; the other shepherds with him saw nothing of it. He took five steps in the direction of the bush, to view it at close range, and when G-d beheld the countenance of Moses distorted by grief and anxiety over Israel's suffering, He spake, "This one is worthy of the office of pasturing My people."

- What are the two qualities emphasized in these two interpretations which enabled Moses to notice the burning bush?



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Dr. Aviva Zornberg on Exodus

It begins with Moses turning aside to see this wonder which is the bush that is burning in fire but not consumed. And so that first moment of turning aside from your straight path, receives attention in the midrashic tradition that it's a certain quality of the spirit that allows him to move away from the straight and narrow, as it were, from his own concerns, and to simply to notice an anomaly in the world and to look for meaning in it.

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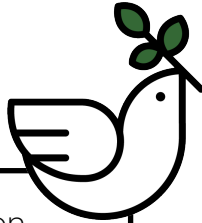
Rabbi Arthur Strimling, Kolot Chayeinu

And the text says, 'And Moses thought, "Let me, pray, turn aside that I may see this great sight, why the bush does not burn up.'" This bush is clearly none of his business, out of his way, but he just has to turn aside and look at it. And that reveals something deep about the man. He is a seeker; not just a seeker after justice, but a man seeking his destiny. He is living contentedly as a shepherd, with a loving father-in-law, a wife, a son, a nice job. He could just settle. But something is driving him to turn aside, to pay attention to oddities, possibilities, omens.

In Carlos Castenada's books..., his Shaman guide, Don Juan, teaches that we should pay attention to what is at the corner of your eye, to what your peripheral vision spots. That's where the magic, the mystery, the truth lies. Not in what is straight ahead. Moses understands that.

And, in the manner of this manifestation, appearing as a burning bush, G-d is also revealed as one who appears not only in high drama, but also sets subtle signs for us. Most of G-d's appearances are in dramatic forms with big production values – a pillar of fire or on a mountain top in lightning and clouds. But here, Rashi points out, G-d is manifest in, appears in, a bush, the humblest of plants – just a lousy little bush in the wilderness... burning. It took someone special to notice it.

Moses notices, and in that noticing ignites the engine of our entire history. How many other shepherds walked that way and either missed the bush or saw it was burning but didn't look long enough to see the miraculous in it? How often do I, do we, miss the wonders that are all around us every moment of every day, wonders that speak to our questing natures not only in moments of crisis, but every moment of our lives?



- What conditions do you need in order to notice, pay attention, be present?
- What hinders your ability to be present or notice? What is distracting or keeping your attention elsewhere?
- What could you do or change to notice something that is right in front of you, that perhaps you haven't seen before?



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We miss many things in our day-to-day lives. It is such a common phenomenon that it's been given a name: "**inattention blindness**." We all have blind spots that prevent us from seeing things that should be obvious. If we focus on one thing, we can completely miss something else which is right before our eyes.

This became famous in the "**invisible gorilla experiment**" of cognitive psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, which revealed how people can focus so hard on something that they become blind to the unexpected, even when staring right at it. If you haven't seen this experiment, watch it [here](#).

Interestingly, according to the researchers, not only do we not notice these things, we think that we DO notice them. "We vividly experience some aspects of our world," they write, which leads to "the erroneous belief that we process all of the detailed information around us. In essence...we are completely unaware of those aspects of our world that fall outside [our] current focus of attention."

In later research, Simons decided to use the infamy of the invisible gorilla experiment to his advantage, creating a similar video that asked for the same results from the audience. Before you continue, try the second test [here](#)!

This time, those who knew about the gorilla experiment noticed it much more than those who were not aware of the experiment, but they failed to notice other strange changes and occurrences in the new video. It turns out our intuitions about what we will and won't notice are often mistaken.

- Taking "inattention blindness" into account, what could you do to help yourself see the "gorillas" in your life?
- What habits or practices could you develop and hone to enable yourself to notice more?
- How could we, as a community, help foster a community of noticing?

