

## Bringing meaning to life

*Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy*

SHEMOT

VAEIRA

BO

BESHALACH

YITRO

MISHPATIM

TERUMA

TETZAVEH

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VAYAKHEL

PEKUDEI

# SHEMOT

## THE UPSTANDER EFFECT

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**Having** grown up in Pharaoh's palace, Moses emerges to seek out his brethren. He immediately sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a fellow Hebrew, 'he turned this way and that and saw that there was no one, so he struck down the Egyptian...'<sup>1</sup> The very next day he sees two Hebrews fighting and intercedes, asking why one is striking his fellow. The man questions Moses' right to get involved, retorting, 'do you propose to murder me, as you murdered the Egyptian?'<sup>2</sup> The obvious question is, if 'he turned this way and that and saw that there was no one' present the previous day, how does the incident become common knowledge so quickly?

**A famous** social psychological phenomenon, known as the Bystander Effect, states that the presence of others in any given situation serves as a deterrence for people to intervene and offer help if someone is in need. When I explored this concept with a group of students, we conducted a basic experiment

during recess, whereby one of the students dropped books in a busy thoroughfare in the school. While tens of people walked past, not one stopped to help the student in need. In contrast, when the exact same experiment was conducted at a quieter time, with only one other student walking past, it transpired that that the student immediately stopped to assist.

**Social** psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley popularized this concept following the public murder of Kitty Genovese outside her apartment in New York City in 1964, during which time no one stepped forward to help or to call the police. Most people attribute this trend to the diffusion of responsibility and to the assumption that since there are other people around someone else will intervene. Others attribute the phenomenon to the social peer pressure not to intervene if no one else is helping.

**These days, with the expansion of technology and endless opportunities for communication, it is becoming increasingly easy to be anonymous within society - both virtually and in reality.**

This, coupled with the increase in crowd culture and the death of individualism, only serves to exacerbate the phenomenon of the Bystander Effect, and to highlight the absence of a sense of individual duty or responsibility.

**Utilizing** the same language as the biblical text, the Mishna states, 'in a place where there is no one, strive to be someone.'<sup>3</sup> When Moses goes out and sees his fellow being beaten, 'he turned this way and that...' Perhaps he sees plenty of people around, which explains his encounter the very next day with someone who clearly knew what had happened. However, the crowd are mere bystanders, indifferent to the plight of their fellow and unlikely



to get involved. As soon as he 'saw that there was no one' willing to get involved, he realized that it was up to him to step in and intervene – to be one of the first recorded upstanders in history.

**The Bystander Effect** goes directly counter to a principle that lies at the core of our strength as a nation, 'all of Israel is responsible for one another.'<sup>4</sup> This phrase serves as the foundation for the belief that each of us hold collective responsibility for one another. More recently, the phrase has been commonly understood to highlight the value of moral and social responsibility among the global Jewish community, transcending a sense of civic duty and serving as a religious requirement.

**In a place where 'there is no one,' where no one is stepping forward to act, where no one is getting involved,**

**it is upon us to be that person, to offer a voice to the voiceless, to give help to the helpless and to be proactive in all that we do.**

When so many around us are bystanders and filled with indifference, it is up to us, to choose the path of responsibility, and to become the Moses of our moment.

**If the bystander affect encourages others to stay anonymous, perhaps the upstander effect will encourage others to make a difference.**

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 2:13. <sup>2</sup> Exodus 2:14. <sup>3</sup> Avot 2:6.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shavuos 39a.

#### Parasha Fact:

The Midrash explains that Pharaoh's daughter extended her hand to save Moses in the Nile and God extended her hand further. Sometimes when we put everything into a positive deed, God extends our reach.

#### Next week in Vaeira:

*In the description of the birth of Moses, the Torah seems to leave out the names of his parents.*

*Later, however, they are mentioned by name and this delay holds the key to an important lesson for all of us, vis a vis where our focus should be when carving out the path of our own destiny.*