

Exodus 32:11-14

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Moses interceded for the people in an effort to convince God to relent from destroying them. He appealed to the LORD's work protecting Israel and His love for Abraham. Moses also suggested that other nations might misunderstand God's actions.

Hearing of the LORD's intention to inflict judgement upon the Israelites, *Moses entreated the Lord his God*. The original Hebrew literally says, "Moses softened the face of the LORD his God." Moses acts as an intercessor on behalf of the nation.

Moses begins his intercession with *O Lord*. He addressed God with His covenant name Yahweh. Accordingly, Moses immediately addressed God as the God of the people, rather than simply as his personal God.

Moses' argument consisted of several parts. First, Moses asked *why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?* In verse 7, the LORD referred to the Israelites as "your people," that is, Moses' people. Here, Moses turned the tables by referring to the people as *Your people*, that is, the LORD's. Moses reminded the LORD that it was He Who brought the people out of Egypt using His *great power and mighty hand*.

Moses then asked the LORD *why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'?* Moses makes the quite logical point that if the LORD voided His covenant with these people, then slayed them (per His rights under the covenant) then started over with Moses, it would mar His testimony with the Egyptians. This is important in light of what is said in [Exodus 7:5](#), where the LORD stated that because of the plagues, Egypt would know that He is the LORD.

Moses then asked the LORD to *turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people*. The phrase *turn from Your burning anger* conveys the thought that Moses wanted the LORD to forgive the Israelites, and go back to engaging with them as His covenant people.

The phrase *change Your mind* has caused considerable discussion. The Hebrew word “naham” can be translated “repent,” “relent,” and “change one’s mind.” It clearly indicates that Moses’ argument changed God’s mind. This is consistent with James’ assertion that the prayer of a righteous man is greatly effective. There James gives the example of Elijah, who asked God to withhold rain from Israel ([James 5:16-18](#)).

However, the Bible also says that “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent” ([Numbers 23:19](#)). The word translated “repent” in the Numbers passage has the same root of “naham” as in verses 12 and 14. So on the one hand God does not repent, and in this passage He repented.

This is actually consistent with the Bible’s presentation of God’s nature. When Moses asked God His name, God answered “I Am Who I Am” ([Exodus 3:14](#)). Which is to say “existence.” Humans can’t conceive of a being who both exists and is existence itself. God is One but also Three. God is Spirit, but became fully human through Jesus. He was fully human and fully God at the same time. We cannot explain these things from a human perspective. Here, God is in one place speaking with Moses, while simultaneously being in all places and holding creation together, as He has done from the beginning of time ([Colossians 1:17](#)). Here God is fulfilling His sovereign will, since He is not a man who repents, while also changing His mind.

His ways are higher than our ways. He is God and we are His creations ([Romans 11:33](#); [Isaiah 40:13](#)). Somehow God is sovereign over all things while simultaneously engaging with humans in such a way that He listens to them, that their choices actually affect the future (which He holds in His hands).

[For more discussion about the paradoxes of God, read our Digging Deeper article.](#)

Verse 13 contains another reason Moses argues the LORD should not destroy the Israelites. It involved the patriarchs and His promise to them. He asked the LORD to *remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’*”

If the LORD were to make a great nation of Moses it would still fulfill God’s promise to *multiply Abraham’s descendants as the stars of the*

heavens. However, by appealing to the LORD to *remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel*, Moses is also entreating the LORD to consider His full relationship with *Abraham, Isaac, and Israel*. Moses could have included Israel's prophecy over his twelve sons ([Genesis 49](#)), or similar instances where Moses might be able to ask a question like, "Wouldn't destroying the people of Israel make Jacob's statements untrue, and therefor dishonor him?" But it seems reasonable to consider that Moses is speaking to a sovereign God who would only need to be reminded to *remember* in order to fully consider His high regard for *Abraham, Isaac, and Israel*.

Moses' intercession for the Israelites was successful because *the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people*. This episode could be viewed as God testing Moses to see if he would fulfill his appointed job and intercede for the people. This seems a reasonable perspective since God revealed the plan to Moses and said, *Now then let me alone*, which actually invites Moses' engagement. Moses passed the test. The LORD responded to his intercession by graciously relenting from the judgment the people deserved for their violation of the covenant.

Biblical Text:

¹¹ Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil *intent* He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about *doing* harm to Your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit *it* forever.'" ¹⁴ So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.