

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYIKRA: THE CALL THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

Package of Diamonds

The expression '*Vayikra* – He called' is not a chance introductory word to the third Book of the Torah. Sefer Vayikra, which focuses predominantly on our active relationship with Hashem, is named such because it is a calling to each and every individual through the ages. Looking at the parashah with this perspective in mind, we can identify a number of key lessons as to how best respond to that call.

The Haftarah, as it often does, offers a foundational summary of the messages of the parashah. According to the classic commentators, the prophet Isaiah is addressing the Judean king, Achaz (8th Century BCE), caustically rebuking him for his idolatrous ways. By way of introduction, Isaiah says, 'Not Me have you called, Yaakov; for you have grown weary of me, Yisrael' (43:22). The Maggid of Dubno (Rabbi Yaakov Krantz, d. 1804) explains this verse with a parable. A wealthy man arrives at a roadside inn shortly before Shabbat. Anxious not to delay, he rushes inside and begins his preparations for Shabbat, but not before he instructs the porter to bring in one of the bags he has left in his carriage. A while later, the porter enters, out of breath and perspiring profusely. The wealthy man asks the porter where his package is, and the porter, panting and struggling to talk, tells him that his package is in the next room. The wealthy man responds, 'I do not have to look in the next room to know that you have brought the wrong package. You are so worn out that it is clear that you have brought in something heavy, but my package contains only diamonds!'

Isaiah's comment to the people of Israel, concludes the Maggid of Dubno, is that if they are feeling worn out from serving

Hashem, leading them to seek foreign ways of expressing their religiosity, they are looking in the wrong direction[YK1.1]. True service of Hashem is not a chore but a pleasure; if you have grown weary, says Isaiah, it means that you have not understood the calling properly. This, then, is the first question to ask ourselves as we approach the Book of Vayikra - there is a call, but are we understanding it correctly? Do we see it as a burden or a diamond?

The Power of Awe

Rashi tells us that the term '*vayikra* – and He called' has a nuanced meaning of closeness. Hashem did not happen to speak to Moshe, but He invited and called upon Moshe to experience a unique relationship with Him. What is interesting, however, is that while the verse says, 'He called to Moshe', it does not immediately make it clear who was calling until the end of the verse, which concludes, 'And Hashem said to Moshe'. Thus, the Midrash explains that this calling must be connected to the previous passage, the concluding verses of Sefer Shemot. There, the lengthy discussions about the construction of the Mishkan end, somewhat anti-climatically, by saying that Moshe could not enter the Ohel Moed, the Tent of Meeting, because of the glory of Hashem that filled it. Here, the Midrash explains, Hashem proclaimed that it was not correct that the tzaddik who had worked so tirelessly for the Mishkan should not be allowed to enter, and He called to Moshe. But, as the Midrash emphasises, Moshe's hesitation to come into the Ohel Moed uninvited was a sign of his humility. Despite his close relationship with Hashem and despite the familiarity



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he had gained with the Mishkan and all its deep significance, Moshe retained his sense of awe.

This message is critical. Responding to the call of Hashem is a privilege, but it carries with it an ironic danger that the more familiar we become in our religious service, particularly in terms of our houses of prayer, the more indifferent we might become towards them. Indeed, the Mishnah Berurah (Introduction to Orach Chaim Section 46) writes that before entering a shul, one should pause for a moment and say the verse, 'And I, in Your abundant kindness, enter Your house (Tehillim 5:8)'. Our spiritual growth must be accompanied by an ongoing sense of awe at the privilege of building a connection with God.

Creative Inspiration

The details of the sacrificial procedure, with its myriad of intricate laws, take up the entirety of the next two parshiyot and much of Sefer Vayikra. Looking through the Gemara and the Midrash Halachah on Sefer Vayikra, Torat Kohanim, which deals with these laws, we can see that every word in every verse is crucial. The Sages extrapolated from every nuance of these parshiyot an extraordinary number of laws. As such, one might expect the very first law of Vayikra to be fundamental. But perplexingly, the first word of the parashah is taken by the Sages to exclude a situation that seems unlikely ever to take place. From the phrase '*adam ki yakriv* – when a person offers a *korban*', we learn that a stolen animal cannot be used for a *korban*. Just as Adam HaRishon certainly could not have used a stolen animal had he brought a *korban*, as there was no one else to steal from, so too must we ensure that our *korbanot* are not from stolen property.

While the sentiment behind this law seems clear, one might wonder why it is given such a strong emphasis, being that it would appear to be highly unusual for a person to attempt to use a stolen item to perform a mitzvah.

The Kli Yakar (d.1619) explains as follows. The first two people recorded in the Torah who brought *korbanot* were Kayin and Hevel. Both of these brothers, however, were reprimanded. Kayin, we are told, did not offer the best of his crops as a *korban*, and Hevel, while he did choose his choicest animals, is implicitly criticised for bringing a *korban* only after seeing his brother do so. He tagged along, so-to-speak, but did not initiate the project himself.

The law that excludes a stolen animal from being used as a *korban*, concludes the Kli Yakar, is applying the concept of theft in its broadest sense. The Torah is emphasising that our *korbanot* must be brought as Adam would have done so. Adam, when he would have brought his *korban*, would have done so entirely of his own volition. With no one else sharing the world with him, there was no possibility of him looking over his shoulder and 'stealing' someone else's idea.

Here, we again find inspiration in how to respond correctly to the call of Hashem. If our mitzva performance feels like a burden, something is wrong. But if we are able to proactively embrace opportunities for personal spiritual growth, we demonstrate that they are a package of diamonds.

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