

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayikra)

To hear a calling ...

I recently received this story via e mail:

A lady passing a young boy on the street noticed he was entranced by a pair of shoes in a store window.

'My, but you're in such deep thought staring in that window!' she said.

'I was asking G-d to give me a pair of shoes,' was the boy's reply.

The lady took him by the hand, went into the store, and asked the clerk to get half a dozen pairs of socks for the boy. She then asked if he could give her a basin of water and a towel. He quickly brought them to her.

She took the little fellow to the back part of the store and, removing her gloves, knelt down, washed his little feet, and dried them with the towel.

By this time, the clerk had returned with the socks. Placing a pair upon the boy's feet, she purchased him a pair of shoes.

She tied up the remaining pairs of socks and gave them to him. Patting him on the head she said: 'No doubt, you will be more comfortable now.'

As she turned to go, the astonished kid caught her by the hand, and looking up into her face, with tears in his eyes, asked her:

'Are you G-d's wife?'

This week we begin the book of **Vayikra** (Leviticus), whose name, which means '**And He (G-d) called**' is taken from the first word of the first verse in the book:

"And He called to Moshe, and G-d spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting (1:1)

Rashi points out that this is an unusual turn of phrase; normally G-d **speaks** to Moshe, whereas here G-d **calls** him. Indeed, Rashi notes that when Balaam (the Gentile Prophet viewed by Jewish tradition as being a wicked personality) speaks with G-d the word used is "**vayaker**", meaning '*G-d happened upon him*'; and the difference in these two Hebrew words is simply the letter Aleph. Interestingly, in a traditional Torah scroll, the Aleph appears as a smaller letter, suggesting that the difference between experiencing something as a coincidence and a calling, is a very fine line.

Rashi also notes (1:1) that when Hashem called Moshe, only Moshe could hear Hashem's voice, and other people were unaware of G-d's calling.

What does this all mean? And why does this unique calling of Moshe (as opposed to the more frequent description of G-d *speaking* to Moshe) occur here at the beginning of the book of Vayikra?

Vayikra is also known as '**Torat Kohanim**' the book of the Kohanim (priests) because much of the book involves the laws and obligations particular to the priestly service in the Temple. And when one considers that the Jewish people are called a '**Mamlechet Kohanim**' (A Priestly nation,) one must assume that the underlying message of this book is an allegory of our responsibility to the world. Just as the Kohanim are meant to serve, teach and model

for the Jewish people, we as a Jewish people are meant to serve, teach and model for the world. We are meant to be a light unto the nations; to create a model society; to be leaders.

And where does leadership begin? Leaders look at the events of life and hear a calling; most often a calling that no-one else hears. **What most people often pass off as the events of the moment, leaders perceive to be the challenge of the day.**

I recall years ago, when my children were still little, having the opportunity to spend a few days in Washington D.C. Of all the places we visited, the place and the moment that most impacted me was the Lincoln Memorial, perhaps because I was not expecting to be moved so deeply; particularly by the words of his now famous Gettysburg address, reproduced on the memorial wall.

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live...

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate ... we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.

It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. ... that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under G-d, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Abraham Lincoln
November 19, 1863

Think about it: had Abraham Lincoln not been President, there might never have been a civil war, and America, and with it the western world, might still be wallowing in the miseries of slavery. How different such a world would be! One man, in the right place, at the right time, heard a calling, and understood what needed to be done.

Indeed, the first time the phrase Vayikra appears in the Torah as a calling (as opposed to naming something such as when G-d calls the light ‘day’; Bereishit (Genesis 1:5) is when G-d calls to Adam (Bereishit 3:9) and says ‘Ayekah?’; ‘Where are you?’. Obviously G-d is not trying to **find** Adam; rather G-d is asking Adam, who has just eaten from the Tree, where he has allowed himself to go; yesterday Adam was so close to G-d, and now he is so distant he has to hide in the garden....

The paradigm of being called, and hearing that calling, is knowing where I am.

Reading this vignette of the boy looking longingly through a window at a pair of shoes, I wonder how many people passed by without even noticing that boy’s bare feet, much less feeling his struggle. But one woman was not seeing a boy with bare feet; she was hearing a calling to do something about it.

This is perhaps our greatest challenge: what is our calling; each of us as individuals, and all of us, as a collective. Do we hear that still small voice? And will we rise to the challenge of what it calls us to do? That is the challenge of the book of Vayikra.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman