

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Vayikra)

It wasn't the danger, or the tension, or even the uncertainty of what lay ahead that was the most challenging part of being in Lebanon, it was the drain of the routine. Day in, day out, patrol after patrol, eight-hour shift after eight-hour shift, Lebanon had a way of wearing you down, until it all became one big blur of green.

Which was probably why he slipped by me. Every time we went out on patrol my responsibility as the Officer On Duty (O.O.D.) was to brief and inspect the men.

All these years later I can still do it in my sleep: ammunition, cartridges, special weapons check, dog tags, canteens, passwords, orders for opening fire, radio frequencies, personnel check, emergency systems...all done so many times it became a routine you barely needed to keep your eyes open for.

Sometimes, despite having a list of the men going out, a name would change because someone switched duty with someone else, and this was such a day. One of the guys had a pass, and found someone to switch with him, which was how this fellow, we'll call him Uri, showed up for our patrol.

Under normal circumstances if a personnel change occurs before a patrol, you have a responsibility to be sure the new man is sufficiently trained and able to fulfill his duties, but after so many patrols, you just assume that anyone on patrol is trained for combat and knows what is involved before agreeing to walk the back roads south of Tsidon (below Beirut). Which was why I was shocked to suddenly realize, half-way through the patrol that the reason this particular soldier, a wisp of a fellow, looked so familiar, was that he was the assistant to the Battalion rabbi, in charge mainly of keeping the kitchen kosher who thought it would be a lark to go out on a patrol! In fact, he wasn't even combat-trained!

So what do you do? We had a responsibility to finish our patrol as our mission was to make sure there were no mines or booby-traps hidden on the sides of the road and people's lives depended on us keeping to our time schedule. We were in a hot-zone full of hostile activity, so Israeli army vehicular traffic was forbidden at night, and every stretch of road was only opened in the morning when the foot-patrols issued the "all clear".

On the other hand, having an untrained soldier along put everyone else's life at risk; how would he react in the event of combat?

Sometimes we make decisions by not being able to decide, and this for me this was one of those moments; I just kept walking.

About an hour later our tracker saw something in the sand by the side of the road, and clearly puzzled, suddenly shouted at everyone to hit the dirt.

Now, if you were walking along on a beautiful country trail in the middle of a wide-open area and someone yelled at you to hit the dirt, you would probably think he was mad. But if you are on a patrol in Lebanon, and your army tracker, normally an unflappable fellow, suddenly screams at the top of his lungs for you to get down, you would drop and roll on a dime, which was exactly what we did: one minute we were walking along in the beautiful, still cool morning air enjoying the sunshine, and the next minute we were all rolling out for cover in the dust.

You don't really have time to think about it, you just fall back on the hundreds of times you have practiced this exact maneuver, and everyone did exactly what they were supposed to do. Rolling for cover with weapons ready, it took about ten seconds until they opened up on us - three terrorists behind a low hill who had snuck over the border and were just waiting for us to get into their kill-zone. I was too busy splitting off my cover fire unit, directing fire, reporting to battalion, situating the medic, and preparing for an assault, so it took me a few seconds before, with horror, I remembered that 'Uri' was with us. And then I felt panic in the pit of my stomach as I realized that he had been carrying the extra ammunition for the heavy machine gun, a critical weapon at a moment like this.

Needless to say, when I looked across the road Uri hadn't known to make sure he was near the man with the machine gun, and in fact I wasn't even sure he knew he had the ammo the machine gunner needed. It was just one of those things you take for granted on a patrol, everyone knows what a box of 7.62mm ammunition is for, and what to do with it in the event of attack.

With the cover fire unit getting positioned, and fire still pouring down the hill from the three terrorists above, it was too noisy to yell across to Uri, but as I was resigning myself to the fact that we would just have to let this one work itself out, Uri must have suddenly figured it out because he suddenly jumped up, grabbed the ammo boxes and ran, under fire, across the road to the machine gunner. I watched him for a moment, struggling to open up the boxes, and then turned back to the task at hand, leaving G-d to work it out.

I have often thought about that moment, and what it must have taken for that rabbinical assistant to run under fire across that road.

Sometimes, heroes are the most ordinary people, who rise to the most extraordinary occasions.

This week's portion, *VaYikra*, introduces what is essentially an entire book of the Torah almost completely dedicated to the concept of sacrifices in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and later, the Temple. Nearly a quarter of the Torah is dedicated, apparently to the how, when, where and what of animal offerings. It is interesting to note, therefore, that this topic is introduced with a rather unique occurrence. We often find in the Torah, that G-d speaks to Moshe, telling him what to say and teach to the Jewish people. At the beginning of this week's portion, however, before speaking to Moshe, G-d decides to **call** him:

“Vayikra el Moshe, va'yedaber elav me'Ohel Moed le'mor:

“Daber el B'nei Yisrael ve'amarta a'lehem: adam ki yakriv mekem Korban la'Hashem, min ha'be'hemah, min ha'bakar, u'min ha'tzon takrivu et korbanchem.”

“And He called to Moshe, and He spoke to him from the tent of meeting (the Ohel Moed) saying: “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: a man who offers up (brings close) from amongst you a sacrifice to G-d, from animals from the cattle or from the flock (sheep) offer up (bring close) your sacrifice (offering).” (Vayikra 1:1-2)

Why here, does G-d suddenly decide to **call** Moshe before speaking to him? How often have we read in the Torah “G-d speaks to Moshe saying...”? So why does G-d suddenly feel the need to call Moshe before speaking to him? In fact, what exactly is the difference between speaking to Moshe and calling him? After all, if G-d is calling Moshe, isn't He by definition already speaking to him? Indeed, what is the purpose of G-d calling, or even speaking to Moshe at all? Can't G-d simply choose what to put into Moshe's thoughts?

Further, why does G-d specifically choose to *call* Moshe (as opposed to just speaking to him) here, just as the Torah is introducing the concept of sacrifices? Is there some connection between the sacrifices and the call of G-d?

Rashi suggests that in fact, this was not a unique occurrence, because whenever G-d spoke to Moshe, he first called to him, as an act of *Chibah*, love. But this doesn't really answer our question, it just changes the focus: even if G-d always called Moshe prior to speaking with him, there is still the question as to why the Torah chooses to express this idea here, at the beginning of *Vayikra*.

Perhaps one way of approaching this topic is to draw from an interesting peculiarity that occurs at the beginning of the portion (*Vayikra*) in an actual Torah scroll: the word *Vayikra* is written with a small aleph. Jewish tradition explains this detail as the result of a fascinating dialogue between Moshe and G-d. It seems that Moshe, described in the Torah as "*the most humble man on the face of the earth*" (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 12:3), was uncomfortable with the fact that G-d the Omnipotent was calling *him*. After all, the nature of humility is that Moshe felt he was unworthy of the honor of being called by G-d, so he felt it more appropriate to write the word *Vayaker*, (without the aleph) meaning that G-d happened to appear to him, but G-d insisted on saying He called Moshe directly. So Moshe wrote the word, but with a small aleph, indicating his discomfort with this honor.

In fact, **Rashi** points out here that Bilaam, a non-Jewish prophet of much lesser stature, was not called directly and the word for G-d's encounter with him is indeed "*Vayaker*" (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 23:4, 16).

In other words, the book of *Vayikra*, which introduces the concept of sacrifice and opens with the phenomenon of Moshe being called by G-d, flows from the idea of humility as represented by Moshe, the most humble man to have ever lived.

In order to understand the concept of sacrifices, and the reason that this concept begins with the idea of man being called upon by G-d, we must first understand the concept of humility in general.

Most people think that humility is to believe that I am nothing, but in truth, humility is much more about recognizing that Hashem (G-d) is everything. As an example, one might think that if a great and yet humble artist was asked if he was great, he would answer that he was not, because to be humble means to know you are nothing. But that is not true. To be humble is not to believe that you aren't great; on the contrary, imagine that one night Leonard Bernstein falls ill and the New York Philharmonic is set for a performance in the White House. So Zubin Mehta is called to take his place because only a great composer could fill such shoes. And imagine Zubin responds that he is not a great composer at all, and declines. This is not humility; it is self-effacement.

If you are a great composer, then you should know you are great; the essence of humility is not believing that you are not great, or gifted, or talented, when you really are. Humility is recognizing that that your greatness has nothing to do with you, it is a gift from G-d, and your challenge is what to do with it.

Imagine, at the end of last week's portion (*Shemot* (Exodus) 40:35) we read that Moshe is not allowed to enter the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and now he is being called by G-d! In fact, this is not something which is new to Moshe; the first time Moshe is called by G-d is way back at the Burning Bush (*Shemot* (Exodus) 3:4), when G-d calls Moshe forth to become the redeemer of the Jewish people, and ultimately of the world.

Vayikra is not just being called; it's a calling.

Moshe, all alone shepherding his flock in the deserts of Midian, sees a Burning Bush, but ultimately it is what he hears that is of paramount significance; he hears the voice of G-d, coming from deep within him, calling upon him to stand up to the challenge of who he was meant to be.

One of the greatest pitfalls in the human experience is the confusion between who I really am, and what I do. We live in a society that judges people primarily based on what they do, or how much they earn. But what we do is not who we are, it is just what we do. Indeed, we are each given a particular role as represented by what we do, only because through that role we can offer to the world the true gift of who we are. And if tomorrow we can no longer do whatever it is that we do, it does not take away at all from who we are, it merely challenges us to figure out what role we are now meant to play and how we can slide into that role to continue to make the world a better place.

And if this is true, then the reason **Rashi** suggests that Moshe is called every time G-d speaks to him (and not just here at the beginning of *Vayikra*), is because the difference between a calling (*Keriah*) and a coincidence (*Mikreh*) is only in our minds. Indeed, *everything* that comes into our lives is a calling of one type or another, because everything in this world flows from Hashem, who created everything to begin with. Ultimately, G-d is putting on a play called the history of the world, and we are characters and understudies in the great play. And if we choose not to play our character role, we'll be missed, but the play will go on without us.

Indeed, Moshe might easily have viewed the Burning Bush as a fascinating occurrence; what made him Moshe was that he understood that it was a calling. Indeed, a close look at the verses there reveals quite clearly that Hashem does not call Moshe until *after* he approaches the Burning Bush. Perhaps how often we feel we are 'called upon' by G-d, is really a function of whether we are able to recognize everything around us as a calling emanating from Hashem's voice.

So where does this ability to see the hidden calling in everything around us come from? Maybe it stems from the trait of *Anavah*, humility. Indeed, one sees this in every step of Moshe's development.

For example, consider Moshe's dialogue with G-d at the same Burning Bush we are discussing. G-d essentially wants Moshe to go back to Egypt to redeem the Jewish people; and Moshe resists this idea and argues with G-d about it for seven days! Imagine, the Jewish people are in agony, lives are being lost daily, and Moshe is still in Midian arguing with G-d! How could Moshe resist such a calling, delaying the redemption of the Jewish people by a week while he argues with G-d?!

The Torah tells us that Moshe feels that Aaron, who is his older brother, and a great prophet, as well as having been with the Jews in their pain and suffering for the past forty years should be the redeemer of the Jewish people. In other words, if G-d's play is the redemption of the Jewish people, then what is the difference which one of us (Moshe or Aaron) plays that role? And precisely because Moshe's life was never about Moshe, but always about how he can enhance the Great play through his character (role), then obviously he wants to give the role (and all the honor with it) to his older brother Aaron.

This is why Hashem's answer to Moshe is "*Ve'ra'achah, ve'Samach Be'Libo*", when Aaron sees you he will rejoice *in his heart*. In other words, Aaron is already there, in tune with the fact that it's not about himself or you, but about the redemption of the Jewish people.

And the root of many of the challenges in this world, whether theological, existential, or practical all stem from this place.

Ever notice how sometimes people lose faith with G-d because they prayed for something personal, and “it just didn’t happen; G-d wasn’t listening”? When was the last time you heard someone say: “I have been praying for world peace, and it just isn’t happening, so I don’t believe in G-d.” This person is only praying for himself and if the center of your universe is yourself, then obviously there is little room for G-d....

What was so incredible about Moshe was not that he was an *Anav* (humble person) but that, with all that he did, he *remained* an *Anav*.

Perhaps this is the hidden essence of what the *Korbanot*, the sacrifices, were all about. If I can take the physical world and all that I am given in it and recognize that what is really important is not the cars or the money, but where they come from (gifts with which to fulfill my purpose) and what I am going to do with them, then I become a partner in bringing Hashem into the world. And this is part of the meaning of taking the animal, representing both the physical world around me, as well as the role I am given in that physical world, and seeing that its challenge is how I succeed in offering it back up to G-d.

This is why this concept appears here. Right after the Jewish people build the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) for G-d, they are ready to learn how to serve in it, just as, each individual Jew, when we get out of our own Egypt, we are ready to learn how to serve Hashem in the great *Mishkan* that is the world.

Twenty years ago, I watched a boy who was barely a man hear from deep inside himself, above all the gunfire, a calling, and I watched him live up to the awesome potential of that moment, under fire, with an entire squad in the balance.

There is nothing more powerful, and more meaningful than the gift of hearing that voice that calls us to who we are meant to be and living up to its challenges; may we all be so blessed.

Shabbat Shalom,

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