BS”D

Parshas Vayikra

Three Beginnings

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*G-d always calls us. We just have to be listening.*

First Beginning

This is how the *Toras Cohanim* (a Halachic Midrash written by the Talmudic sages) begins the Book of Vayikra:

Why does the Torah need to say, “G-d called Moshe” before speaking to him from the Sanctuary (Ohel Moed)? We already know G-d would call Moshe by name before speaking to him from the story of the burning bush.

Perhaps G-d called Moshe from the burning bush because it was the first time He spoke to him.

Oh, but G-d called to Moshe from Mt. Sinai too, which was not the first time. But then perhaps G-d called to him then because He was speaking to all of Israel.

Still, since G-d called both times to Moshe, we can infer that He called to him every time. It wasn’t only the first time since G-d called from Sinai as well. It wasn’t only when He spoke to all of Israel, for G-d called Moshe from the bush. So we can infer that He called Moshe every time!

No, we cannot. Perhaps G-d called only those two times because they were both from the fire (Mt. Sinai was on fire as it says, “And the mountain was all afire”) but under ordinary circumstances, when there was no fire, G-d didn’t call Moshe.

That is why the Torah tells us, “Vayikrah,” He (G-d) called Moshe from the Ohel Moed. He called Moshe by name every single time, not only out of fire.

Perhaps the message of the Toras Cohanim is that we may feel at times a closeness to G-d, a “call” telling us that G-d knows and cares for us, and we must respond by “hearing” what G-d has to say, that is, by asking ourselves what He wants of us.

We may feel that call, that special closeness when we are young and idealistic, when we are at the beginning of life’s journey. Or we may feel that call when we have to act as a community to achieve large, noble goals.

The truth is that we should always be open to G-d’s call even when there is no fire, no exciting project or special historical moment. G-d is always calling us. G-d is always available at every time in our lives, not only at moments of high drama. G-d always calls us. We just have to be listening.

*Moshe alone hears the call of G-d because Moshe’s aleph is small.*

Second Beginning

This is how the *Be’er Mayim Chayim* (a commentary on the Chumash by Rabbi Chaim of Tzernowitz, a disciple of Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polnoa) begins his commentary on the Book of Vayikra:

In the word Vayikra, the last letter, Aleph, is written in the Torah as a small letter compared to the other average-sized letters. What is the significance of the small Aleph?

The sages say that if a person breaks objects when he’s angry, it’s a gateway to worse offenses, including idolatry.

A person can conduct himself in a way that everything he does is serving G-d. Before he does anything, he asks himself, will this bring pleasure to G-d?

Or he may follow his own impulses and desires. Once you choose a path in life of following your personal impulses, there is no limit to how far you will go. If I’m angry, I vent my anger by breaking dishes. If I give into that relatively harmless impulse, I can just as soon give in to worse impulses. Since my decision of how to conduct myself is not built on whether it’s good in G-d’s eyes but whether I feel like doing it, what is to stop me from giving in to seriously wrong desires? What’s to stop me from ultimately serving idols? Your own personal drives and desires become “the strange god” that governs you.

But G-d provides us with a tool to help us make the right decisions and follow the correct path. It is not the practical intelligence that we use constantly to navigate the world. Rather, it is a more theoretical intelligence, a “hidden” wisdom that we possess.

When someone ponders in search of new insights and original concepts, he may experience the flash of intuitive, hidden wisdom. This wisdom is sort of the intermediary between the pure spirituality of the soul and the practical concerns of day-to-day practical intelligence.

This higher intelligence is symbolized by the letter Aleph. The letters of the word Aleph (aleph, lamed, pei) spell Pele (pei, lamed, aleph), wonder. This Aleph, this higher intelligence, allows man to rule over his impulses and become truly human. The word for man is Adam which has three letters: aleph, dalet, and mem. Dalet and mem spell dam, blood. When the human uses his higher intelligence, his Aleph, he becomes Adam, intelligence governing the blood, i.e., the lower instincts.

The numerical value of Adam is 45, which spells the word “mah,” what? What makes a person human is that he is always asking himself, “What?” What is my purpose, what is my life about, what is expected of me?

Always asking the question “what” is the quality of humility. Humility is the greatest of qualities. G-d resides with the humble person, for the humble person makes room within himself for G-d’s presence.

Now Moshe, our teacher, is the letter Aleph of the collective Jewish people. As the hidden intellect connects the soul to the individual’s personality, so, too, Moshe connects Hashem to the Jewish people.

But Moshe is not an ordinary Aleph. Moshe is the humblest of men. He is the small Aleph.

This why the Book of Vayikra begins with G-d calling to Moshe. Moshe alone hears the call of G-d because Moshe’s aleph is small. Because Moshe, more than any other Jew, was the vessel for G-d. His selflessness and humility allowed G-d to speak to him, and through him, to the rest of the Jewish people.

I would only add that each one of us has a spark of Moshe. Each one of us has the spiritual intelligence, the humility to overcome our own impulses, and to hear the question “What?” to hear G-d’s call to us to live a G-dly life.

*One who thirsts for wisdom will achieve the 48 gates of understanding.*

The Third Beginning

The *Mai HaShiloach* (commentary of Rav Yosef of Izbizh, student of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk) begins his commentary on Vayikra like this:

There is a Midrash that says that the Torah tells us 48 times to treat the *ger* (convert) properly. This corresponds to the 48 times the Torah uses the word “be’er” (wellspring).

What is the significance of 48? The sages tell us there are 50 gates of understanding. Our teacher Moshe understood 49 gates. That means that a regular Jew can understand 48. You gain wisdom when you thirst for it. That is why the Torah mentions wellsprings 48 times. One who thirsts for wisdom the way one longs for clear, fresh water from a spring will achieve the 48 gates of understanding. The convert is one who searched for G-d with great thirst and cleaves to Him by accepting Torah and Mitzvos. So the *ger* is also mentioned 48 times.

But Moshe had a greater desire for G-d than any other Jew. “Vayikra,” meaning “And G-d called to him,” represents the yearning, the desire, the call from G-d that Moshe felt. Therefore, he exceeded the 48 gates and reached the highest attainable gate, the 49th.

I add only this: Torah study, prayer, and the religious life must be something we pursue with enthusiasm, with thirst. Our religious acts must be a response to hearing the call of G-d and our soul’s resultant drawing near to Him in thought, speech, and deed.