

God-Says-Be-Big_Vayikra_March7-2014_raw

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Tomorrow morning we will begin the third of the five books of Moses, the third of the Chamisha Chumshei Torah. It is a beginning that is radically about the beginning. And what I mean by that is the first word of the third book of the Torah, Va'ikra, Va'ikra, is a very, um, interesting word.

It's an interesting word. It means, and he called, Va'ikra, and he called. Of course, in the translation of the book of Va'ikra into other languages, we don't have that as the name of the book.

Va'ikra is called what in English? Leviticus. Right? The book that deals with the Levites and having to do with the the sanctuary, the tabernacle in the desert, and then subsequently the laws of the cult around the temple. But it is interesting that in the Hebrew, in the original, we don't call the third book of the Torah Leviticus, having to do with Levites, but Va'ikra, and he called.

A number of questions about that word, Va'ikra. First of all, it doesn't say who called. Va'ikra elav.

Va'ikra el moshe, va'idaber elav Adonai, and he called out to Moses and God spoke to him. The pronoun, the one calling, isn't named. L'shon Nistar.

It's a hidden, a hidden locution. One. Two.

The word is actually written every year. I go over this with you. It's written a very odd way.

Orthographically, if you would actually to look at the five letters in a Torah scroll, which we will do tomorrow morning, you will see that four of those letters are written in their normal font. Let's say 16, 16. The last letter, the aleph of the word Va'ikra, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, aleph, is at the end of the word Va'ikra, it's the A, the aleph.

It's written in about nine, about nine. It's called an aleph ze'era. It's like a miniature aleph.

What does that mean? We've explored that before, but tonight maybe we'll explore a different possible meaning. And thirdly, Va'ikra to Moses at this moment, in the beginning of the book of Leviticus, must connect us to the end of the last book, the book of Exodus. And as the Torah turns, last week's episode had Moses, having built the tabernacle, it's complete, it's finished.

The cloud of glory now descends upon the tabernacle, and the glory of God is in the tabernacle. And Moshe could not enter the tabernacle. That's the way the book of Exodus ends, with Moses on the outside.

And someone called to Moses, a hidden someone, which the rabbis read this way. Va'ikra el-Moshe and someone and was called to Moses. This is, of course, God.

And why does God say now, Va'ikra, and he called to Moses? Lashon chiba. To call to someone kria, the word in Hebrew, kria, for the rabbis of the Talmud and for Rashi here is lashon chiba. It's an affectionate term.

It's as if God is saying, Moshe, Moshe, Moshe, where are you? Lashon chiba. That the angels use, as it says, And they call one to the other, the angels described in Isaiah, who call, kara, one to the other, that is the language of love, reciprocity, of solidarity, of friendship, of equal footing, angels, all of us calling one to the other. God uses a locution, a term of affection at this moment.

And the traditional understanding of that is Moses felt that he was on the outside. He just completed this incredible structure, something he worked on for years, and suddenly he found himself on the outside. But perhaps there's something more that might explain the two first questions as well.

Something about the nature of the tabernacle itself, the nature of the third book, which is the centerpiece of the five books of Moses, and because of that forms the heart of the Torah. Maybe there's something about sacrifice itself, which required a specific affectionate term in a way that was not used before. Maybe.

Moshe Halbertal is one of the world's foremost scholars of Jewish thought. He is out of Hebrew University, is also a fellow at Sholem Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and in his book, aptly named On Sacrifice, he says two things. One is that the modern sense of sacrifice as something for, sacrifice for, something greater is modern.

In antiquity, we had only sacrifice to. We brought and made sacred to God, to that power, to that source, and at the heart of the sacrificial moment, at the heart of it, is an understanding of of a gift ethic. An ethic or reciprocity of giving and receiving, giving and receiving, which is operative in the human domain, but in the divine human relationship, giving and receiving are not reciprocal.

God has given everything that we give back. And so at the moment of giving, says Moshe Halbertal, there is great risk of rejection. What is rooted in sacrifice, in the word for sacrifice, in Hebrew, korban, which means karov, to come close.

That's the word in Hebrew for sacrifice, is to come close. And another word, which is a mincha. What is a mincha? It's a word used in the Bible for an offering, even that term to offer something.

It isn't a gift per se, where someone is required, obligated to receive it and then give back in kind. In the sacrificial cult of the Jewish people, in the heart of the Torah, is danger of being rejected. He writes, it is a mark of superiority that entry into the gift cycle is voluntary.

It is an act of love rather than of duty. He writes, this is true in a fraternal relation, but not among inferiors and superiors. In the human divine relationship, the divine privilege to reject is rooted in the fact that the sacrifice is actually an act of returning rather than giving.

God is entitled, as the one who gave the produce in the first place, to refuse its return. That's at the heart of the Cain and Abel story. The first moment of sacrifice in the book of Genesis and the entire Torah is a story of someone with good intentions who brought a gift and it was rejected, which led to violence.

And here Moses stands, about to enter into that tabernacle that will have offerings, where people will voluntarily give. And Moses is afraid. Moses is afraid for the first time in his life, perhaps, of being rejected.

Moses is afraid, maybe for the first time in his life, that what he has to offer won't be acceptable. And it leaves him outside. can't tell you how many people I know who sit in my office.

I can't tell you how many Davids that I sit with in my own inner life for the past 25 years, where the thought that the gift that I have to offer won't be received. That that which is my unique korban, what it is that I have been uniquely chosen to give and to offer in this world, scares me. I'm afraid of it.

I'm afraid that the universe has no room for my disturbance. J. Alfred Prufrock, who said, do I dare disturb the universe? Every child disturbs the universe and says, make room for me. His Royal Highness has arrived.

And the universe makes a space lashon chiba. And G-d calls out in the language not of inferiority and superiority of up and below, but of malachi asharet, of angels, friends, who are part of one collective. He says, it's safe here.

Come on, Moshe. I'm not going to reject what it is that you've brought. But the universe wants to hear your song.

Which is maybe why, everybody, that vayikra is the Hebrew term, not Leviticus. Because it means vokare. It means a vocation.

It means your unique voice. In Whitman's Song of the Self, he writes, I believe in you, my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, and you must not be abased to the other. Loaf with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat, not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best, only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice, the hum of your valved vokare, of your vocation, of your voice, vayikra, your calling, what it is that is yours to give, but that sometimes we say, I need permission, please, to stand in this.

Yeah? I need your telling me that standing in it is my birthright, that the universe far from rejecting me is calling me and saying, what you're giving, I need. Marianne Williamson, of course, a long time ago, wrote in her book, A Return to Love, our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. Our light, not our darkness, is what frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant? Who am I to be talented? Who am I to be fabulous? I know that's what I'm asking myself, right? And then she writes beautifully, actually, who are you not? Who are you not to be those things? You are a child of God and that your playing small, Moses, does not serve the world. Your playing small does not serve the world. Come inside, Moshe.

How many Moshes are there in the world who stand and look and wait and say, ah, I can't. I'm a little bit too nervous. Do I dare disturb the universe? I had the pleasure this week of attending a screening of a movie.

I spoke about it last night at a community meeting. And the director is a very well-known director, quite famous, very down to earth, lovely guy, nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. Brooklyn.

He would have loved that right there. And you know what he said, David? You know what he said to me? He said, when asked about the movie that he just directed and now is going to be released everywhere, he said, where did you get this idea? When did it start to bubble in you? He said, well, when I was 12 years old. He's 45.

When I was 12 years old, I wrote a poem about this topic. And I brought it to someone. And someone saw something in me.

Someone saw my aptitude. Someone saw my imagination. Someone loved what I did.

Someone adored it. Someone valued it. Someone said, this is unique.

And from that moment, I knew that I would make this movie. Chibah, chibah, chibah. The universe said to him, yes, you, you, you.

You can. Do you dare disturb the universe? You bet you better. Disturb the universe with your uniqueness.

Disturb the universe with your vocari, with your vayikra, with your song, with your calling. Step into the possibility of rejection and know that it's worth it. And about that little aleph that could.

I'd like to propose tonight that that little aleph represents God. It's not unheard of in the kabbalistic tradition to say that the letter aleph is a stand-in, a metonym, a symbol for the divine who is singular, who is one, who is aluf. And that little aleph gets smaller, as if to say, I will make myself small so that you can be big.

There's enough room in my universe for what it is that you are bringing. And even God says, be big and I'll hold it in. So I want to pray with you tonight.

May the source that illuminates and that inspires, that raises up within each and every one of us that sound of a soul, that lull of that song. May that song be sung. And may whatever it is that

scares you be vanquished by what it is that inspires you to be what it is that you have been created to be.

May the universe expand to hold all the gifts that have been waiting to be given. And let us say, amen.

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