

Romemu Shabbat April 01, 2017 Sermon

This morning's Kriyat HaTorah, the reading this morning can be found in your Chumashim on page 585. I want to welcome anybody and everybody who is here for the first time. I just also want to let you know, since it's your first time, you might not know the customs of the community. If there's anything really important that you need to share with each other, Torah, those kinds of things, if you could take it outside, that would be great. We know that people are inspired to speak with one another around Torah and other insights, but for now, just we'll keep the talking to a minimum, and we'll turn to page 585.

So 585. This morning, we begin the third of the five books of Moshe, known in, through the Latin and then eventually the Greek, as Leviticus. And as Rabbi Matas Weinberg points out in his wonderful commentary to the book of Leviticus, known as Frameworks, he calls it Il crie Anybody speak in French? Is it Il crie? How is it? The call? Like the cry? Il crie. Il crie. Il crie. Okay. The word Leviticus, with its dry representation of what takes place in the third book of the Torah, its focus on the ritual elements of the cult in the Temple, both in Jerusalem and the Mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert, doesn't fully capture how the book begins.

The beginning of the book, even though it's a book that will eventually make its way within a couple of verses into all manner of things that, for most of us, feel as though they're completely irrelevant, have nothing to do with our religious life. Things like slaughtering cattle and sheep, the technology of the day, as Rabbi Zalman used to call it, the barbecue culture of religious identity. For many people, we gloss over the profoundly unique way that the third book begins. It doesn't begin with Leviticus, with the rules of the Levites, the Levitical code, but begins with, as the French translation, Va'ikra Ilkri. The Hebrew name for this book is Va'ikra, and he called. Il crie, the call.

And he called. It's a strange moment. In a book that will eventually make its way into legality and into all manner of execution, of details being appropriately done in the right way for the priest in Levitical priesthood, it begins with this word, Va'ikra. And as I spoke about last night, Va'ikra is, and he called, and it's strange because the call seems to be superfluous. This call seems to be the kind of call that if you read the Torah carefully, it seems to come out of nowhere. The unnecessary element of calling Moses when Moses was already in dialogue with God. Moses was already in a conversation with God. There was already communication, and all of a sudden the Torah stops and says, and God called to Moses from the tent of meeting, from Ohelmoed, from the fully operational Mishkan, tabernacle, which led to a number of interpretations on the manner and the meaning of the call.

One interpretation of the call is that the call is Lashon Chiba. To call someone in this particular valence of this word means, and God intimately and lovingly spoke to Moshe. God lovingly addressed Moshe who was standing outside of Ohelmoed, and as I said last night, there's significance in our own way, in our own middot, in our own character traits, how we speak to someone who feels like they are on the outside. Moshe has built the tabernacle and now stands outside of the very structure that he built, and God understands that, and God says, Va'ikra, and God calls him.

Another valence of this Va'ikra is that, as Rashi, the great medieval exegete, points out, Va'ikra teaches us, Ya'choz lo ayah kria'ha ella lidibur zeh, U'minayin lecholad dibrot shevet Torah tamud amar me'ol mo'ed, that there is a kria'ha, whenever God spoke to Moshe, there was a kria'ha. It's not always expressed, but there's an implicit kria'ha whenever God spoke to Moshe. But what was the purpose of the kria'ha? Not preciousness, not love, but something else, says Rashi.

Yechol af lehavsakot, tamud amar va'idaber, lidibur ha'ita kria'ha, v'la'ita kria'ha lehavsakot. Rashi says that God speaks to Moshe, and whenever God spoke to Moshe, God spoke by prefacing with a call, saying, Moshe, or, hello, are you there? But God didn't always call to Moshe. There were times in the Torah where there was blank, there was nothing, there was a pause, there's a hafsakah, there's some kind of recess between a moment of divine speech and Moses' ability to integrate that speech. And says Rashi, this kria'ha comes to tell us that God called, but it also comes to tell us when God didn't call. God was not always calling. There were moments in the text that are expressed as a pause.

You can see it when you look inside of the Torah, you'll see that there's a space, sometimes nine letters, sometimes a full paragraph break, there are breaks in the Torah. God called to Moshe, but didn't always call to Moshe, says Rashi, because there was a need for a pause. There was a need to stop and to integrate and to digest and to assimilate and to take in. Moshe couldn't always be on, he needed to be able to say, God, I got it, that was a big download, and now let me handle that. I'm working on it. There was a need for a revach, says Rashi, quoting the Sifra. A revach, some kind of like expanse. Man, I'm telling you, I love this teaching. Even Moses, who got like Verizon, like high speed, he was like, it was like, went to Optic Fiber, he was getting a download, it was coming clear, it was, even Moshe needs to say, okay, God, I got it. Break, pause. That even the greatest student needs time to step away and to say, I think I need some integration time.

The third book of the Torah is the book that youngsters throughout Jewish history, if you were to look at the pedagogy, the educational pedagogy of the traditional Jewish learning cycle, you didn't start young children with what would seem to be the most natural place to start, Chumash with them, which would be Breshit, with Genesis. You began here. This would be the first place that children learn Torah. And the Midrash says, the Midrash says, the reason for that, the rabbinic law is, Yavot Taharot, Yavot Taharim, V'yasot V'Taharot. Let the pure ones come and be involved with pure things. The elements of the, right, the cultic service that purified the individual, that cleansed them. But, Mathis Weinberg points out, I think it's much more likely to begin here because of this teaching, to teach every student that sometimes you need to take a pause, take a breath.

Those pauses, those empty spaces are the negative space of the artist, the mystical void of the mystic. It is the space where we are, as a friend of Ralo Omei said, poetry for me is the space between words. A poet is a poet when he or she can create tension between words, a tension created by space, that lifts the reader outside the piece of paper. Or as he quotes here, I think a very beautiful teaching, we know that in our tradition there are black letters and then there are white letters in the Torah. The white letters are the spaces between the letters in the Torah. The importance of giving ourselves a pause, not always having our foot on the accelerator, not always having ourselves going at full tilt.

It's a powerful lesson as the book of Vay'ikra opens and it's also a powerful lesson as we make our way towards Passover in over a week, that there is a Pesach. There is an opening, there is a space that happens when we give ourselves the appropriate integrative period, when we don't rush at the end of something, into the next moment. And how hard a lesson that is for all of us who are multitasking and multi-this and multi-that, have four different screens because the market is always going, life is always moving, there's always another moment to post something and to get it out there. But if we don't take our foot off the accelerator, we crash. And we are the ones who are responsible to take the foot off and put it on the brake.

I was listening to Malcolm Gladwell. I'm sure many of you know Malcolm Gladwell. The author has a wonderful podcast called Revisionist History. I recommend it highly. And we were listening to it last week. I listened to it and then I told my kids about it and they said they wanted to listen to it and they didn't understand any of it. But it was a bit of a tragic story, but if we can lift something positive from it, I'm hoping that we can. He was looking at the Toyota recall in 2009 to 2011, where Toyota recalled millions of cars and paid billions of dollars in lawsuits for what was called the unintended accelerator incident.

Some of you might remember this, where an accelerator pedal would unintentionally accelerate and it would floor open throttle, which means it was all the way down to the floor, right? All the way down to the floor and they couldn't stop it. They theorized that maybe it was that there was a mat that was getting the accelerator stuck and so people didn't realize there was a mat there. And as Gladwell looked into it, more and more he realized that tragically what was happening was this.

That more often than not, these kinds of sudden accelerations in cars come from people pressing down on the accelerator, thinking that it's the brake. That the car will suddenly accelerate for whatever reason. Maybe they're in a new car. Maybe it's because they're not familiar with it for all sorts of reasons. And then thinking that they want to stop the car and not be familiar with the feeling between the accelerator and the brake, they actually continue to press on the accelerator, not putting their foot on the brakes. Because as Gladwell says, brakes beats engine all the time.

If you're flooring your car and you have your foot on the brake, it will stop the car. Even if your foot is all the way down on the accelerator. 90% of the time at least, maybe more, 99% of the time. It's a very powerful image of sitting with that all week. And I know it's so tragic, but I'm trying to glean something very, like something for me in my life.

And I heard Torah in that. I heard that sometimes I think I have my foot on the brake, but I really just keep going. Sometimes in my life, I think that I can take in more, but I can't. And I need a break. I need to step away from something that's so intense, something that just needs me to say, you know, I really, I got it, but now I need to take it in. We do this at the end of songs sometimes in synagogues. We'll sing a song together. There'll be this rich, rich experience. Like all of a sudden we'll be thinking, okay, what's next? In our lives, we'll be out of a job and we'll think to ourselves, I'm a day out of a job. I'm freaking out. I'm out of a relationship for a week. I'm freaking out. Vayikra, a love.

And God spoke to Moshe, but not always. God didn't always call because there was a hafsakah, there was a need for some kind of break, some kind of pause, some kind of exhale, some kind of period where there can be integration. So I'd like to call forward this morning for the group Aliyah, those in the community who need some strength in taking a well-intended and well-meaning and a very conscious pause in something in their life. They've learned, they're learning, and they keep adding and adding and adding instead of stopping, stopping, stopping. If you need support, if you need a blessing from the Torah this morning, of God saying to Moshe, I will give you information, but then you have to integrate it and assimilate it and chew on it. If that's where you are in your life this morning, I invite you to come join us in the Torah for the first Aliyah.