

Parashat Vayikra: From the Depths I Called You Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

A new book, a new parasha, a new stage of ancient Israelite evolution. Welcome to Sefer Vayikra, also called Torat Cohanim. More than any other book in the Torah, Vayikra is possibly *the* basis, and the manual, if you like, for worship of the Jewish God until this day.

I used to think that Vayikra was a kind of “time out” from the timeline of the Torah, that it disrupts the plot which begins in Sh’mot and continues in Bamidbar. I am not so sure about that anymore.

The opening verse of Vayikra is brilliant! I have read it so many times, and had never noticed...

“And he called out to Moshe, and God spoke to him from Ohel Mo’ed, saying...” (Vayikra 1:1)

Who called out to Moshe? and why?

The book could have easily begun with the words “And God spoke to him (to Moshe)...”

The classic interpreters wondered the same thing.

Last week we read that upon the successful completion of the Mishkan, the cloud of God’s presence came down into it and resided there. This meant that Moshe could no longer enter the Mishkan!

A number of Parashot earlier, that same Divine cloud descended upon Mount Sinai and Moshe ascended to meet Him. Moshe then was also called forth, into the mist on the Mountain, unto God’s presence.

Hence, now that the very same mist descended and filled the Mishkan, the Mishkan essentially became a mobile Mount Sinai, enabling Bnei Yisrael to leave the physical mountain and continue on their journey. The voice calling out to Moshe out of the cloud in the Mishkan parallels the voice that called out to him on Mount Sinai.

This calling out, however - ויקרא - is not like speech - וידבר. It is a very primal “voice”, something that seeks our attention without the formulation of speech. The call comes from the mist - both on Mount Sinai and here, in the Mishkan. Speech is an advanced stage of communication; it is a defined collection of words. The call, on the other hand, is vaporous, unclear, not yet defined; and it comes from the depths.

Psalms 130:1 : “Out of the depths I called you oh Lord”.

This call - both God's to man and man's to God - is from the hidden depths of our existence. "Adonai, hear my voice", continues the Psalm. This call, this plea, is the unheard beseeching of human beings. It surges forth continuously from every person. Its volume changes, but it is constantly present. Awake or asleep, at every moment the plea is there: "Hear my voice!" It is an internal call that sometimes becomes speech, conversation, or a physical action. Usually, however, it remains internal and eternally soundless.

We, intelligent human beings, are attuned to hearing and deciphering actual words and sentences, or clear voices, such as laughter or sobbing, but what I am referring to here is that mysterious "something" that is always present in everything, but our mind doesn't register as voice. I am referring to a movement that wishes to happen in the world, in us, in nature. I am talking about the continuous longing for fulfillment and actualization on the one hand "I will be that which I will be" (Ehey Asher Ehey) - and the constant longing for the Ein Sof (infinity) from which we came and to which we will return - "Return us to you, God, and we will return."

We are calling God continuously from the depths, and God calls us unceasingly from the mist, from the mystery of life. He calls us to be and he calls us to return.

Those who have never "heard" or felt or "known" that call will not know what I am talking about. Those who have will know exactly!

For those who may be wondering how to "hear" God's silent call, the only answer I know is: Wait! For it is not possible to evoke the Divine call. It calls to us, and not the reverse. Moshe waits and "hears" it when it comes. Waiting involves boredom, idleness, patience.

Two things interfere with our ability to hear: distractions and the need for clarity.

Today more than ever we fill every free second with "noise" in the form of text messages, emails, neurotic news consumption, and obsessive Facebook activity. Never has the human capacity for paying attention been so challenged. Perhaps this is the reason our world seems more insane than ever before. We have drowned out the voice from the depths. We hear only the chatter emitted from various screens.

We find it very difficult to make the time and space within our busy, noisy lives. It is hard to be bored, hard to submit to the murky mist. The world wants results, bottom lines, plans of action.

For me personally, a truly idle Shabbat (which is rare, I admit!) and a solitary hike in nature guarantees hearing.

The more significant obstacle to our "hearing" both the Divine and the human call, is our need for clarity! Clarity smothers it. The inner call is both misty and mystic. There is great value in clarity, but the Divine voice is not to be found

there. This is the great lesson that God tried to teach Elijah on Mount Sinai some 500 years after he called to Moshe on the very same mountain.

” And He said: 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.' And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” (Kings 1, 19:11-12)

God’s call is always “a still small voice.” It is the human mind that can only hear the sound of dismantling mountains and shattering rocks. In all of this noise and fire it is very difficult, yet possible, to hear that still small voice.

God is patient. He does not stop calling to us from the mist, even when we are busy and distracted. And from the depths of our own busy lives we never stop calling out to him, even if we cannot hear or notice our very own pleas.

God’s call to human beings has not changed since intelligent man was created: “Ayeka?” Where are you?

And what is man’s call to God? I think it is one of the thousands of variations of the silent plea that Yitzchak addressed to his father, Abraham, as they were climbing Mount Moriya with the fire and the wood for the offering: “Where is the sheep for the sacrifice?”

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha