

Parashat Vayikra, 5776, 2016:

*Moshe's True Greatness*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

“G-d called to Moses, speaking to him from the Communion Tent...” (*Sefer Vayikra* 1:1, translation, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*)

*Sefer Vayikra* begins with a call from G-d to Moshe. In a celebrated gloss, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Rabbah*, *Vayikra* 1:13, notes that the use of “*vayikra*” (“and He called”) is highly significant, since it stands in stark contradistinction to the manner in which Hashem communicated with the non-Jewish prophets of the world:

**And He called to Moses:** Every [time G-d communicated with Moses, whether it was represented by the expression] וַיְדַבֵּר, “And He spoke,” or וַיֹּאמֶר, “and He said,” or וַיִּצַו, “and He commanded,” it was always preceded by [G-d] calling [to Moses by name] (*Midrash Sifra* 1:2-3). [קָרָא] is an expression of affection, the [same] expression employed by the ministering angels [when addressing each other], as it says, “And one called (וַיִּקְרָא) to the other...” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 6:3). To the prophets of the nations of the world, however, He revealed Himself through expressions denoting coincidence and impurity, as the verse says, “and G-d happened to [meet] (וַיִּקְרָא) Balaam” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 23:4). - [*Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 52:5] [The expression וַיִּקְרָא has the meaning of a coincidental happening, and also alludes to impurity. (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In summary, Rashi opines that the term “*vayikra*” connotes a number of crucial aspects of the unique I-thou relationship that obtained between Hashem and Moshe:

1. A planned, respectful, and considered encounter
2. Deep and abiding affection
3. Angelic metaphor – allegorically representing Moshe's greatness

#### 4. *Kedushah* (holiness-based) and purity

As Rashi emphasizes, it is essential to realize that this four-pronged approach was completely absent from Hashem's dealings with the prophets of the other nations, since His meetings with them were mere happenstance. These incomplete revelations took place in secret and in the dead of night, without warning and by surprise, and lacked holiness and purity.

We are finite beings; therefore, it is natural for us to view our relationship with Hashem from our own perspective. As a result, many of us properly focus our efforts on becoming dedicated *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d). Literally thousands of books have been written centering on this crucial and fundamental enterprise. Yet, as Rashi's comment above clearly indicates, G-d is a full-fledged partner in the I-thou relationship: Hashem was insistent that Moshe be treated with the warmth, dignity, and respect that he deserved. Stated somewhat differently, Hashem quite simply refused to interact with Moshe in any other manner than that which reflected his exceptional stature.

In contrast, Moshe wanted the Almighty to reveal Himself to him in the selfsame manner through which He communicated with the non-Jewish prophets of the world. Moshe's marked humility led him to reject special treatment or honorific behaviors – even if they emanated from G-d Himself. According to Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340), in his commentary on the Torah entitled, *Ba'al HaTurim*, this is precisely the significance of the diminutive *aleph* that appears in the first word of our *parasha*, “*vayikra*”:

Moshe was great and humble [at the same time]. Therefore, he did not want to write “*vayikra*.” [And G-d called] He only wanted to write “*vayikar*,” [And G-d happened to appear] which is an expression of an accidental meeting. Using this expression [*vayikar*]

it would be as if Hashem only spoke to him in a trance or in a dream just as it is stated regarding Bilam. Therefore, Hashem explicitly commanded him to write the *aleph* [to represent his true stature.] Moshe, however, further responded to Hashem and told Him, based upon his thoroughgoing humility, that he would only write a diminutive *aleph* that was smaller than any other *aleph* that would appear in the Torah. He, therefore, wrote it in miniature. (Translation my own)

From here we may learn that the miniature *aleph* was a compromise that enabled Moshe to fulfill Hashem's will, while remaining existentially true to his humble nature. Hashem accepted Moshe's approach and this is, therefore, the manner in which every *Sefer Torah* continues to be written until our own time.

*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* (1:15) underscores Moshe's humility in a fascinating fashion. It begins with the following statement: "*Kol talmid chacham sheain bo da'at, neveilah tovah heimenu*" ("Any Torah scholar who is lacking in knowledge – the carcass of an animal that died without proper slaughter is better than he"). This formulation is strange on a number of counts. The most obvious, however, is the following: If a person is a Torah scholar, by definition he has knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. If this is lacking, how can he be a *talmid chacham*? As a result, "*da'at* – knowledge" must mean something other than what it initially appears to be. A number of *meforshim* (commentators) suggest that "*da'at*" in this instance has nothing to do with any cognitive content. Instead, it refers to humility and, in particular, to the incredible humility of *Moshe Rabbeinu*. They derive this notion from the conclusion of the *Midrash*:

In order to know that this is true [i.e. "Any Torah scholar..."], come and learn from Moshe the Father of Wisdom and the Father of the Prophets. [What did he do?] He took the Jewish people out of Egypt. Moreover, through his efforts, many wonders and miracles were performed in Egypt and awesome acts at the Sea of Reeds. Then, too, he went up to the highest heavens and brought the Torah [down to earth] from Heaven. He also was involved in the construction of the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary). [Even given all of this, however,] he did not enter into the holy precincts of the *Mishkan* when G-d's presence was manifest unless, and until, G-d called him. As the Torah states: "G-d called to Moses, speaking to him from the Communion Tent..." (Translation my own)

This *Midrash* underscores the crucial idea that Moshe's awesome and amazing accomplishments did not lead him to arrogance. Instead, we learn that "he did not enter into the holy precincts of the *Mishkan* when G-d's presence was manifest unless, and until, G-d called him. As the Torah states: "G-d called to Moses, speaking to him from the Communion Tent..." In sum, he was forever, "*avdi Moshe*" ("Moshe my servant") and, consequently, the sole prophet in Jewish history with whom Hashem spoke "mouth to mouth" and "face to face." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:7-8, *Sefer Devarim* 34:10)

None of us will ever be able to achieve the level of Moshe; nonetheless, we can try to emulate his humility in our approach to our Creator. In that way, and with Hashem's ultimate *chesed v'rachamim* (kindness and mercy), may we continue to grow closer to Him. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdb718@gmail.com](mailto:rdb718@gmail.com).

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