

Shlomo Riskin

# TORAH LIGHTS

VAYIKRA: SACRIFICE, SANCTITY AND SILENCE

Maggid Books

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Vayikra

## *When God Calls Twice: Two Separate Expressions of Summoning*

*And God called to Moses and He spoke to him  
from the Tent of Meeting saying...*

LEVITICUS 1:1

**T**

he portion of *Vayikra* opens with two separate expressions of “summoning” – “And God *called* to Moses and he *spoke* to him.” Why are there two distinct expressions, to call and to speak? Perhaps one may suggest that this parallels the divine repetition of Moses’ name at the burning bush, when the Almighty cries out “Moses, Moses” which the Midrash usually explains as being a repetition of affection. When I look back however upon my own early years, whenever one of my parents called my name twice (at that time it was “Steven, Steven”), it generally meant that I was in trouble for something I had done that was not particularly appreciated by the older generation. Why do we therefore assume that in this case of Moses the repetition reflects affection rather than anger?

The truth is that the Midrash in the beginning of this Torah

portion presents another explanation. At the end of the book of Exodus, the Torah describes a cloud which descended upon the Tent of Meeting, a cloud which symbolized the Divine Presence. The Torah likewise insists that no one – not even Moses – could enter this divine cloud without being especially invited by God to do so. Hence, suggests the Midrash, God had to call out to Moses to permit him to enter the cloud, after which God spoke and communicated a specific message.

This explanation not only interprets the repetition of the divine summons but also provides a most profound and magnificent symbolism expressing the divine challenge to humanity. The Almighty appears as a cloud; we apprehend Him only “through a glass darkly.” Perhaps the reason why our God has neither shape nor form and is not clearly defined in any physical way is in order to teach that those who follow such a God must be prepared to chart new territories and to enter undefined areas. Our God created a world which contains chaos so that we can make order of it and He formed that world with evil so that we may perfect it in the Kingship of God. We must enter the nebulous and the unknown and bring God’s presence into areas in which He is not yet manifest. Egypt was a clearly defined society with a specific caste system of masters and slaves, lordly Pharaohs and abject subjects. We followed an unknowable God into an unknown desert in order to bring out His divine word (*dibbur*) into the arid wasteland (*midbar*).

A voice called out in the desert: prepare a place for the Lord, make a straight pathway in the desert for our God.

Isaiah 40:3

And so does the prophet Jeremiah praise Israel:

I remember the lovingkindness when you were young, the love of your youth; you walked after me in the desert, in a land which was not yet seeded.

Jeremiah 2:2

This is the ultimate challenge of the true person of faith: To enter unknown terrain and to bring the divine message of ethical and moral monotheism

to a world that does not yet know it. This is the ultimate challenge of our life in Israel, filled as it is with uncertainty and danger. Israel the people, from the backdrop of Israel the land, must sanctify Jerusalem and proclaim from the holy Temple the message of world peace and human justice.

What gives the individual the strength and the courage to walk with God into the unknown and even to make a place for the Almighty in a wilderness? Perhaps if an individual really feels that he is being summoned by God, that he has a divine vocation – that he is being called by God to the extent that he feels a “calling” – then he goes forward into the cloud unafraid.

Given this understanding, I believe we have an even deeper insight into why Moses is summoned twice and why God repeats his name “Moses, Moses.” The Midrash teaches us that every individual has a double image: He/She is the person that he/she is but is also the person whose image is imprinted in the divine Chariot (*merkava*) in the highest heavenly sphere. This double human identity is even given expression in two very similar blessings which we recite at weddings under the nuptial canopy. One blessing reads:

Blessed are you, the Lord our God, who creates the human being.

The second blessing reads

Blessed are you, O Lord, who has created the human being in His image, and in the image of the shape of His form has He fashioned him as an eternal building. Blessed are you, O God, who creates the human being.

These two blessings are two aspects of every individual. First, each of us is born at a specific time in a specific place to a specific set of parents with a specific physical build and appearance, slated to live for a specific number of years. Second, each of us as a member of a historic nation, has a collective memory which extends backwards to Sinai and the Garden of Eden, as well as collective anticipation which extends forward to the messianic age. It is this second aspect of our personality which links us to eternity and enables us to transcend our specific time and place.



God summons Moses twice and calls out at the burning bush “Moses, Moses” because there are in reality two Moseses: the first person, Moses of Egypt, was a prince in Pharaoh’s court and fell in love with the Midianite Tzipporah; the second person, Moses, spoke to God and sacrificed all of his princely comforts to link his destiny with his people and their redemption. In so far as the first aspect of our transient personality is joined to the second aspect of our transcendent personality we will have the capacity to meet God in the haziness of the nebulous cloud of the unknown. God calls Moses twice because it is the second Moses who has the courage to face uncertainty and, because of that, he has gained eternity.