

Parashat Vayikra, 5772, 2012:

Humility is Greatness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel.

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

As the above verse states, our *parasha* begins with a call to Moshe. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Rabbah*, *Vayikra* 1:13, notes that the use of “*vayikra*” (“and G-d called”) is very significant. In his explanation, Rashi opines that our term “*vayikra*” connotes a number of crucial aspects of the I-Thou relationship that obtained between Hashem and Moshe:

1. A planned, respectful, and considered encounter
2. Deep and abiding affection
3. Angelic metaphor (since the angels call to one another)
4. *Kedushah* (holiness-based)

Rashi asserts that it is essential to understand that this four-pronged approach was completely absent from Hashem’s dealings with the prophets of the other nations. His meetings with them appeared to be mere happenstance and accident, taking place in secret, in the dead of night, without warning, and by surprise. In addition, they lacked any sense of holiness. Indeed, there was no encounter that represented a relationship and communication, such as obtained between Hashem and Moshe. (See *Midrash Rabbah*, *Vayikra* 1:13 for a complete in-depth analysis.)

Given that Hashem is infinite and we are finite, it is natural for us to view our relationship with Him from our own perspective. Therefore, we focus upon how we can become better and more profound *avdei Hashem* (servants of G-d). Little wonder that thousands of books have been written that focus upon this crucial and fundamental enterprise. Yet, Rashi clearly indicates that G-d is a full-fledged partner in the I-Thou relationship. As such, Hashem insisted that Moshe needed to be treated with the warmth, dignity, and respect that he deserved. Thus, man is in search of G-d, while the Almighty is equally in search of man.

In contrast to Hashem's approach, Moshe wanted the Master of the Universe to contact him in the same estranged manner in which He communicated with the non-Jewish prophets of the world. His abiding 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 famous work, *Baal Haturim*, this is the significance of the diminutive *aleph* that appears in the first word of our *parasha*:

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 Bilaam. 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)

Consequently, we learn that the miniature *aleph* was Moshe's compromise to do Hashem's will, while remaining existentially true to his humble nature. Hashem accepted this compromise and it has been written in every *Sefer Torah* until our own time. In sum,

Hashem assented to Moshe's vision of himself while simultaneously maintaining His own.

None of us will ever be able to achieve Moshe's stature. Nonetheless, we can try to emulate his most prominent ethical characteristic, i.e. humility, and ever strive to act with this *middah* when we approach the Master of the Universe. With Hashem's help, may we have the wisdom and vision to do so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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I have recently posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:

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