

DOES HE DESERVE IT?

by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig

*"And He called ("Vayikra") to Moshe, and G-d spoke to him from the tent of meeting saying."
(Vayikra/Leviticus 1:1)*

The first word is interestingly peculiar: the letter aleph at the end of the word is written significantly smaller than all the other letters. Ba'al HaTurim (1) explains that Moshe wanted the aleph removed from the word Vayikra so it would read "Vayikar" ("And He chanced upon Moshe"), to indicate that G-d called to him by chance, similar to the way that he called to the evil prophet Bila'am (Bamidbar/Numbers ch. 22-24). G-d insisted that Moshe write the aleph in the word, demonstrating how G-d spoke directly to him, so Moshe wrote the aleph smaller than all the other letters.

What was Moshe trying to accomplish by changing the Torah in this way? If Moshe's prophecy was not similar to that of Bila'am, why would he attempt to mislead us by indicating that it was? Furthermore, the Torah explicitly states earlier (Shemos/Exodus 9:3) "and G-d called to Moshe", and in that Vayikra all the letters are full size. Why did Moshe choose to alter the text here specifically?

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin (2) explains that G-d generally appeared to prophets through visions. Those whose souls were spiritually elevated merited seeing these visions; once they verbalized their interpretations, G-d brought the visions into reality. But the prophet's clarity of perception of G-d's will was limited to the degree that he purified his own soul. Most prophets, as a result of their own human limitations, did not have an absolutely clear understanding of the Divine will. The two exceptions to this rule: Moshe and Bila'am. Moshe completely purified his own soul and G-d spoke directly to him. Bila'am used his faulty character traits to take advantage of the visions to which he was privy, and give negative interpretations to curse his enemies. But when he wanted to curse the Jews, G-d gave him pristine understanding of His will and left no room for the subjective reinterpretation of his faulty character traits. When G-d called out to Bila'am, he did so "by chance", without an aleph, to indicate that Bila'am himself was not deserving of such a high level of prophecy. When He spoke to Moshe in Shemos, He called to Moshe with an aleph because He spoke directly to him in a way that Moshe deserved on his own.

Chasam Sofer (3) says that after the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf and Moshe broke the first Tablets of the Decalogue, the lights of revelation and understanding that they had all previously merited were then taken away from them and given to Moshe. Moshe now was not only able to understand his prophetic visions with his own clear vision, but with the additional clarity the Jews

might have had. At this time, Moshe felt the clarity of the vision was not in his merit, and it would be inappropriate to write the aleph of Vayikra, indicating that he deserved such a revelation on his own. Rather, he was like Bila'am who received revelation that he himself did not deserve, but for the sake of the Jewish people he had it. To this G-d responded that Moshe did deserve to have the aleph, for he was actually pure of spirit, and different from Bila'am, who never deserved his revelation at all. Thus, Moshe wrote a small aleph to indicate that both were true: he was indeed pure of spirit, but he still did not believe he deserved such a degree of prophecy on his own.

Purity of spirit and humility do not mean that one does not recognize one's own strengths. They do mean recognizing that G-d gives each one of us the tools and resources we need to fully realize our Jewish potential and achieve a clear G-d consciousness. And they mean understanding, as Moshe did, that their possession does not grant the right to glory; rather they create an obligation for action and growth.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) Torah commentary of Rabbi Ya'akov son of the Rosh; c.1275 - c.1340; based on gematria [hidden understandings based on the numerical value of words, based on the prescribed value of each Hebrew letter] and Masoretic interpretations

(2) Known as "the Brisker Rav"; Rabbi of Lomza, Mezritch, Kovno, Shklov, and finally Brisk; moved in 1876 to the Land of Israel; refused an official rabbinical post, but nonetheless led the city and all its religious affairs; d.1898

(3) Rabbi Moshe Sofer of Pressburg, 1762-1839, acknowledged leader of Hungarian Jewry of the time.