

YOU SHALL BE HOLY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And He called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent. (Vayikra 1:1)

For those who like stories, Sefer Vayikra is probably not for you. Except for the short account of the death of Nadav and Avinu, when they offered up their unauthorized incense offering, most of the book is consumed with technical halachos, and all kinds of details about sacrifices that we can't even offer today. Talk about dry.

However, as the expression goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Likewise, "when the flow gets holy, the holy start flowing." Or, something like that.

As the Ramban points out, the climax of Sefer Vayikra, if you will, are the words:

You shall be holy, for God, your God, is holy. (Vayikra 19:2)

It's always been about that, about being holy. "Don't eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," and be holy. Don't be like the people of Noach's time, and be holy. Stick with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, for they are holy, and they will make you holy. Likewise, the destruction of Egypt and the building up of the Jewish people was for one purpose only: to create a holy nation, a nation that can be holy to God.

However, being holy is not an end unto itself, but rather, a means to a more important end, as introduced by the very first word of the parshah: vayikra. Or, more accurately, by the little Aleph that hangs in mid-air in a Sefer Torah at the end of the first word. Never has something so little alluded to so much, as Rashi explains.

And He called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Appointed Tent. (Vayikra 1:1)

A "calling" preceded all statements and commandments. It is an expression of love, an expression that the Ministering Angels use, as it says, "One called to the other" (Yeshayahu 6:3). However, to the gentile prophets He revealed Himself with an expression of happenstance and uncleanness, as it says, "God chanced (vayikar) upon Bilaam" (Bamidbar 23:4, 16). (Rashi)

In other words, if you look into a Sefer Torah at the very first word of this week's parshah you will see the word "And He called" spelled: Vav-Yud- Kuf-Raish-Aleph, as it ought to be, except that the Aleph is written smaller. Thus, the first four letters—Vav-Yud-Kuf-Raish—stand out on their own almost as an independent word—vayikar—which means: He chanced upon. This, tradition tells us, is to make a

distinction between the way God relates to the Jewish People and the rest of the world. The relationship between God and the Jewish people is meant to be continuous, ongoing, and if not through direct prophecy, then at least through Divine Providence. God never tires of being in touch with His children, the Children of Israel. However, as we learn from the Torah, any direct communication that God has with the gentile nations is because, somehow, it serves the needs of Jewish history. A gentile can be righteous, and will be duly rewarded in the World-to-Come for being so, but still, if God communicates directly with him, it will be only to somehow fulfill some need of the Jewish people, either directly, or indirectly.

Hence, this is really the meaning of being holy: stay in constant touch with God. The commandment to be holy is like a commandment to stay on the line with God, because that is the way we keep the channels of communication open between God and the Jew. To cease to be holy, or to even just reduce one's level of holiness, is to limit one's ability to communicate with the God on an ongoing basis.

Hence, the Aleph of vayikra functions in very much the same way, spiritually-speaking, that the tuner on a radio does. The size of it indicates how well-tuned we are to God's station; it determines how close we are to God's frequency. Pursuing holiness is like turning the dial in search of the proper station, in order to pick up the signal as fully as possible, making communication between God and us as clear as possible.

Hence, the Aleph, as part of the word "adam" symbolizes the soul of man, the spiritual antenna that allows a person to tune into God in the first place. It is the "receiver," so-to-speak, and if it gets buried by the body, then the possibility of communication with God becomes weakened, perhaps to the point, God forbid, of no communication at all.

Hence, as we have mentioned before, all the plagues in Egypt were designed to re-build and strengthen the Aleph, in order to restore the lines of communication between God and His people. Therefore, first plague was blood, the Dalet-Mem of the word "adam," the part that represents the radio box that houses the receiver, in this case the soul itself. The plague made clearer that the result of slipping to the 49th level of spiritual impurity, was like removing the receiver from within the radio, which certainly makes it valueless as an instrument of communication.

The 10th plague, the death of the firstborn, was performed by God Himself, resulting in a revelation of God to all Jews still alive after the ninth plague. Anyone who survived until the 10th plague was someone whose Aleph had been rectified sufficiently enough to make direct communication with God possible. When the plague occurred, it was like the first crackling sound of that first radio, and the voice that was heard after that. Which brings me to the final part of this message.

Recently, a student of mine told me about a very negative interaction she had with someone, while in America, she was trying to convince about the importance of at least entertaining the possibility of making aliyah. At the very least, she had hoped to show this woman, and others like her, that the

American exile might very well be coming to an end. After all, it does have to conclude at some point in time ...

The woman's reaction was not, "I suppose you're right. These are questionable times. Between the economy, and increasing anti-Semitism ... well, those aren't usually good signs for the Jews, not in the past at least. America has been good for the Jews until now, but it can't last forever. You're probably right. We should start thinking seriously about an alternative future if this is the way history continues to go."

Rather, her reaction was like one that I would expected about 15 years ago, before everything went historically astray. "Are you telling me," she said angrily, "that you who live in Eretz Yisroel are holier than we are here? Holier than the great rabbis who lived here in the past, and those who still do?"

My first reaction, upon hearing this story, and it is not the first one I have heard like it (aside from my own such interactions), was, "Who said anything about being holier than someone else? Furthermore, who is say that Rabbi so-and-so, who left this world long ago, wouldn't change his mind about living in Eretz Yisroel at this time, given the current situation?" Even while the Gadol was alive, he questioned why it wasn't a Torah mitzvah yet to make aliyah, and concluded that calling for mass aliyah wouldn't serve a positive purpose at that time (the 1970s) since most Jews wouldn't heed it. In the end, the great rabbi to whom she referred called living in Eretz Yisroel at that time a mitzvah reshus, that is, a mitzvah nonetheless, but not one that is binding until one actually lives on the land. If the rabbi felt that away about aliyah back in the 1970s, what might he say about it today?

That was my first reaction. Then, as I thought some more, it occurred to me, "How can she ignore what is going on in the world today, and not be concerned? How can she be defensive against the idea of making aliyah, given our past history, and present dilemma? God is clearly talking to us today, and being religious, she should be able to hear what He is saying! Why can't she?"

She is not tuned in. The fact that she is religious means that she has a radio box, and a receiver. She has the components necessary to pick up God's signal and to hear His broadcast. And, the fact that she endeavors to live a holy life of Torah means that she is close to the proper station. However, the fact that she lives in the Diaspora, in a land that lacks holiness, more so now than ever before, which is why the Americans are beginning to abandon Israel for the Arabs, means that her reception is unclear, that it has static as well.

For example, if a person goes to the Kosel, he will act holier than someone else on the same spiritual level who happens to be at a shopping mall at that time. Is the person at the Kosel a holier person? Not necessarily, otherwise he'd live on the same spiritual level even after leaving the Wall. Rather, the Kosel, being the holy place that it is, brings out the holiness in a person, spiritually tunes a person, at least for the time that he is still affected by it. It is the same with Eretz Yisroel versus the Diaspora. Whatever arguments one puts forth in favor of remaining in the Diaspora, none of them can be, because the Diaspora is a holier place. That would be heresy. Whether during times of

redemption or exile, Eretz Yisroel is always the holiest place in the world (see "Talking About Eretz Yisroel" and "Geulah b'Rachamim"). Now, we probably have some of the holiest people in the world living here in the Holy Land. However, most of "us" would not put ourselves into that category, calling ourselves instead, "simple Jews." Simple Jews, that is, living in a very holy place, that tends to bring the holiness out of people, and attune them to God's signal, giving us a clearer signal, a clearer picture of where history is aheadin' at this time.

Argue the point. Defend your own. Criticize us for invading your comfort zone. But, also give us, those who live in the Holy Land, the opportunity to share with you the message of God that may not come in so loud-and-clear so far from the source of the signal.

Text

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