

BEING SMALL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The opening word of this week's parsha and of the entire book that we now begin to read raises a basic question. Vayikra means that God, so to speak, called and spoke to Moshe. The rabbis discuss in their commentaries how this communication between God and man took place and also as where this "conversation" took place. The rabbis also took notice that the word vayikra as it is spelled in the Torah ends with a small-sized alef. Though this is apparently not connected with the problem of where and how God spoke to Moshe, I feel that there is a definite connection as to the question of why God spoke to Moshe and chose him to be the great lawgiver of civilization.

The rabbis inform us that the small alef in vayikra is indicative of the great modesty of Moshe. Unwilling to overly aggrandize himself by writing in the Torah that God actually called out particularly to him, and yet he was forced to do so because of God commanded him how to actually write the Torah, Moshe compromised, so to speak, and wrote the word vayikra with a small alef indicating that he was not really worthy of the honor that God bestowed upon him. That very modesty and humility, the feeling that one should not overly indulge in self-aggrandizement no matter what position of public importance one fills, is the main reason that God "speaks" to people and guides them in their leadership roles. The Talmud teaches us that God abhors arrogance, hubris and unnecessary self-aggrandizement in human beings generally and in public leaders especially.

God Himself, so to speak, relates to man, as he informed the prophet Elijah, "in a still, small voice." If one can use such a term about the Almighty, God is modest in His revelation to humans. All of the prophets of Israel from Moshe onwards were aware that God, so to speak, limited his voice to them in terms of volume and space. Rashi points out in this week's parsha that God's voice did not leave the sanctuary of the mishkan even though it was of unlimited and infinite volume. This is not merely a description of an event that happened long ago in the desert of Sinai but it is an attribute of the Almighty - the firm representation of the "small, still voice" that characterizes His revelation to humans. The prophet Isaiah has his lips burned by the heavenly coal because he spoke against Israel in heaven, allowing himself to become a judge of others instead of being purely an instrument of God's will and instructions.

The rule in modesty is not to prejudge others and not to assume that one somehow can be certain of God's true intentions. Humans are fallible. God is infallible. This alone should engender a feeling of humility and modesty in humans. The small alef of vayikra should remain a constant reminder to us of our relationship to our Creator and to our fellow human beings as well.

Shabat shalom.

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