



Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Drasha for Sedra Vayikra

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וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֵלָיו מֵאֶהָל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:

“And [YHVH] called to Moses and YHVH spoke to him, saying ...” (Leviticus 1:1)

Sedra Vayikra is devoted almost exclusively to sacrifices – offerings of cattle, sheep, goats, birds and grain. We are told in detail how the sacrifices should be offered and which offerings should be brought for which sins.

In modern times we find it very uncomfortable to read about these sacrifices, especially of animals and birds, whether or not we are vegetarian or vegan. Even if we make allowances for the gulf between the sensibilities of Biblical cultures and our own, what are we to make of a focus on sacrifices in this sedra (and indeed in much of Leviticus) that seems to verge on obsessive-compulsive?

The first clue to an answer is in the first sentence of Vayikra, quoted above. The wording is highly unusual. God often speaks to Moses (*vayedaber*), but God very rarely calls to him (*vayikra*). Indeed, the first words in this exact formulation – וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה – occur in only one other place in the whole Torah, at the end of Sedra Mishpatim, when Moses ascended Mount Sinai and God called him from the cloud. (Exodus 24:16).

So this formulation is pretty special. As Rabbi Shoshana Gelfand wrote in her essay, ‘Vayikra: The Book of Relationships’, in *The Women’s Torah Commentary*,

‘God calls Moses before speaking to him. This is a clue that “calling” must mean something more than the content of the words themselves, for if God had used words exclusively during this interaction. the text could simply have stated, “God spoke.” Since the verb “called” is also used, there must be a deeper meaning to that action’¹

What makes the text even more unusual is the form in which the first word is written in the Torah scroll. In the scroll. the aleph at the end of the first word is written much smaller than the other letters, like this:

וַיִּקְרָא

Nobody, of course, knows exactly why this is done. Rabbi Colin Eimer taught that many commentators have noted that if you take away the aleph from *vayikra*, you are left with *vayakar* – and *yakar* means rare, or valuable or noble, which is rather a special way of alluding to the relationship between God and Moses.

Rabbi Gelfand offers another explanation of the formulation, drawing attention to the point that God called Moses *and* spoke to him. She says that the tiny aleph in this context means that God is modelling good communication skills:

¹ *The Women’s Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*, edited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), pp. 185f

‘In order to truly communicate with another being, whether a person or God, it is necessary to engage in what the mystics call *tzimtzum* (a drawing in or contracting of oneself), in order to make room for the other partner in the conversation. Were God to simply speak to Moses, then God would be dictating and Moses would be receiving the dictation. By first *calling* to Moses, God creates a situation whereby God’s presence has withdrawn inward to create room for Moses in the conversation. Moses can now be a partner, rather than a passive recipient.’²

In the sedra, this relationship is exemplified by the role of the sacrifice. The main word for a sacrifice throughout the sedra is קָרְבָּן, *karban*, which comes from the root k-r-b, meaning ‘to draw near.’ The offerings were either wholly consumed by fire (*olah*) or divided in portions shared between the altar, the priests and the family of the offeror (*zevach shelamim*). The offering was a means, literally and symbolically, of drawing near to establish and confirm a shared relationship with God and with people.

Now that we have no temple and no altar, we come together to offer communal prayers instead of sacrifices. As Hosea put it, ‘We shall offer our speech instead of bulls.’ (14:3)

Hosea, however, didn’t have to deal with coronavirus. How do you draw near to establish a relationship with other people and with God when social distancing is the rule for everyone and self-isolation for many?

Well, the answer isn’t terribly difficult to find. Of course we can still pray – alone or in one of the many ways that communities are finding to join in prayer through live streaming, Zoom and other technologies. And then, there is the way we behave – social responsibility. The majority of laws in Sedra Mishpatim cover how we treat other people. At the very end of Sedra Yitro, immediately before Mishpatim starts, there is a discussion about the design of the altar. The commentary in our Etz Hayim chumash quotes the medieval *Yalkut Shimoni* as interpreting this to mean, “In time to come, when there will no longer be an altar, building a just society will be the equivalent of bringing sacrifices.” (1:271).

Building a just society isn’t just about politics and law, it’s also about individual behaviour. On the negative side, this would include not rushing out to stockpile toilet rolls and other goods, emptying the supermarkets shelves when there are people who can’t afford to stockpile and/or are not able to make frequent trips to the shops. On the positive side, we have a range of options for offering help to people who are self-isolated or vulnerable in other ways – whether it is by doing their shopping, running other errands for them or keeping in touch with them to give them moral support. Fortunately, there is an amazing range of technology now available to facilitate this – we and our neighbours, for example, have a WhatsApp group that is buzzing with advice and offers of help.

Micah tells us exactly what is required in place of sacrifices: “It was told to you, man (*adam*), what is good, and what YHVH demands of you – only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God.” (13:8) ...

... provided, of course, that you walk humbly at least six feet from other people.

² Ibid. p. 186