Close To You...

And he called to Moshe, and HaShem spoke to him...(1:1)

The word Vayikra, to call, is the first word in this week's Parsha and is the name of both the Parsha and the third sefer of the Torah. Generally, it is understood that the name of the sefer is an appropriate definition of the message contained therein. What is significant about the word “Vayikra” that it should be used to describe what occurs in this third sefer of the Torah?

The word Vayikra is written in the Torah with a small letter Aleph at the end. The Bal Haturim (ad loc) explains that this is because Moshe, in his modesty, wanted to use the same word that is used when HaShem interacted with Bilaam: “Vayakar” - “happened to meet”.

Vayakar is Vayikra without an Aleph, but HaShem specifically asked Moshe to use the word Vayikra. To signify Moshe’s humility the Aleph is written smaller to indicate that it wasn’t Moshe’s first choice for usage.

The Bal Haturim’s interpretation is difficult to understand. This isn’t the first time that HaShem has used the word Vayikra to call to Moshe, we find it used in Shemos a few times: “and HaShem called to Moshe” (19:20) and “HaShem called to him” (19:3). Why is it over here that suddenly the word “Vayikra” bothers Moshe?

Sefer Vayikra introduces the concept of a “Korbon” – offering. Until this time, the only word the Torah used was “Zevach,” which means to sacrifice. In this Sefer we have an altogether different concept of service to HaShem.

The root of the word Korbon is “Kiruv” – closeness. HaShem is informing us that the service in the Mishkan isn’t simply to pay homage to HaShem; it is to gain a closer relationship with HaShem, which is what He desires.

Under close examination, the first verse of Sefer Vayikra begins in a very odd way: “and He called to Moshe...” Yet there is no context as to who “He” is referring to. From the end of the verse we can deduce that the word “He” is referring to HaShem. But why should the Torah begin a brand new sefer this way? By obscuring who the caller is and immediately identifying Moshe, the verse is clearly making Moshe the subject of the sentence. In other words, Hashem was “calling on” Moshe and the interaction was for Moshe’s personal sake (i.e. a relationship with Moshe).

It is for this very reason that it is an appropriate definition of the third sefer of the Torah. Vayikra introduces the idea that Hashem desires a relationship with his subjects and that the Korbonos are a means of achieving that. Korbonos aren’t merely a means to serve HaShem, they are how we get close to Him. This also explains why Moshe, in his modesty and humility, is uncomfortable with the word in this context; it denotes HaShem wanting to be close to him personally – a fact that he instinctively wanted to keep private. HaShem therefore acquiesced and allowed him to write the Aleph smaller.

(Continued on reverse)
Fit For a King?

When a ruler has sinned….he shall bring his offering a kid of the goats... (4:22-23)

Rashi (ad loc) paraphrases a Gemara (Horayos 10b): “How fortunate is the generation whose king sets his heart on getting atonement for an inadvertent commission of a transgression and he will certainly regret an overt transgression.”

The Gemara continues to explain that if the king behaves thusly, certainly all his subjects will follow suit.

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 1:15) comments (on the first verse “He called to Moshe”) from here we see that a Talmid Chacham without Daas, knowledge, is worth less than a dead carcass. We learn this from Moshe who, even though he took the Jews out of Egypt, went up to the heavens to bring down the Torah, and undertook the entire building of the Mishkan, wouldn’t dare enter the Holy of Holies without HaShem calling to him.

What is this Midrash talking about? How do we draw a connection from Moshe to a generation whose king sets his heart on getting atonement for an inadvertent commission of a transgression and he will certainly regret an overt transgression. It was only then that they noticed they were naked and became quite embarrassed.

The Midrash is telling us that a Talmid Chacham must achieve self-awareness. He must never get lost in his own distorted sense of the greatness of himself. Even Moshe, who was on the highest level man could ever achieve, wouldn’t dream of entering the Holy of Holies without an invitation. In other words, he never lost his self-awareness of who he was. A Talmid Chacham who is not self-aware is much worse than a dead carcass; a dead carcass only transmits uncleanness passively to someone who comes in contact with it. An unfit Talmid Chacham, that is one who is hopelessly lost in his ego and self-importance, actively adversely affects everyone he comes into contact with.

This is the same point that Rashi makes by a king who sins. Fortunate is the generation that has a king that has enough honest self-awareness to admit that he erred, even if only inadvertently. While this may seem like a minor achievement, one has only to look at the current political landscape in the United States to see how high a bar this is to achieve.

Did You Know Continued: Moreover, salt’s ability to preserve food was a foundation of civilization. It helped to eliminate the dependence on the seasonal availability of food and it allowed travel over long distances. Consider that, historically, if someone wanted to eat a steak and didn’t have any salt they’d better be feeding an entire town. Even after they fed their whole family they’d still have almost one thousand pounds of meat that would start to spoil immediately without salt to preserve it. Salt created and destroyed empires. Throughout history, salt was of such a high value that it caused mass population shifts, attracted invaders and caused wars.

Some facts about salt that you are probably unaware of:

1. Every human body contains enough salt to fill three or four salt shakers
2. Salt used to be so valuable (literally worth its weight in gold) it was used as currency
3. In the 18th century American frontier, salt was four times as expensive as beef
4. In Sefer Yechezkel (16:4) it seems that rubbing salt on newborns was considered critical to their health
5. President Jefferson cited control of a mountain of salt, that supposedly lay by the Missouri River, in his justification for funding the Lewis and Clark expedition
6. During the war of 1812, salt brine was used to pay soldiers in the field
7. The French Revolution began, in part, by the peasants’ resentment to the harsh salt tax
8. The Romans and Chinese funded much of their empires by the salt trade
9. A person can die by drinking too much water as it washes out too much sodium from the body
10. Consuming too much salt (about 1 gram per kilogram of body weight) will cause death
11. The word “salad” comes from the Roman custom of salting leafy vegetables
12. The word “salary” comes from salt

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