

Vayikra 5783

ויקרא תשפ"ג

What Does It Mean to Be Called?

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This week we begin reading the middle book of the Five Books of Moses, Leviticus. Its position in the Torah scroll is not just coincidental; the laws of Leviticus are central to the earliest rabbis' understanding of Judaism. The rules in the book are indicated by its name in English (Latin, actually): Leviticus. These are the detailed regulations for the tribe of Levi, particularly that branch of the clan known as the *kohanim*, the priesthood. When the Jerusalem Temple stood 2,000 years ago; the rites of Leviticus were the daily round of God's shrine. Animal sacrifices graced the altar for thanksgiving and guilt offerings, for atonement and healing. Over the next 10 weeks or so, we will read the annual portions of Leviticus and learn that blood sacrifice propitiated the God of Israel. One might say God loved barbeque, and the sweet savor of smoky, slow-cooked beef.

To those of us who want more from Leviticus than a high-cholesterol cookbook, we can study the details of psoriasis, houses afflicted with molds, men and women with bodily emissions from venereal disease, and many other rules and regulations of—to use the technical term—things that are “icky.” I often muse over teaching our bar and bat mitzvah kids these messy details. (One wonders what our coming-of-age ceremonies might look like if Conservative synagogues still sacrificed animals.) Thinking practically, we could use the texts about disease to teach our kids about sexual ethics, and other parts of Leviticus could open the door for a talk about ostracizing members of the community, since those afflicted with the Levitically enjoined diseases were segregated from the rest of the Israelite encampment. Another sermonette that suggests itself: the priests are warned not to serve in the sanctuary when under the influence of wine or beer, a good lesson on the dangers of alcoholism. All this would be a good way of

turning a Torah reading from the gritty details of ancient medicine to a higher and more modern moral plane.

The Rabbis of the 3rd through 5th centuries ignored the icky in favor of the uplifting reading, allegorizing Leviticus rather than preaching it head-on. It is a good way for us to approach the next few months of Torah reading, challenging ourselves to find apposite lessons for our lives from the arcane texts in Leviticus. My own attempt follows, and I will begin with the very first word in the book: *va-yikra*. The Hebrew name for the book is precisely this word, which means, “God called.” When the Rabbis characterize the book by its opening word, it is no longer a book about the priesthood or the icky. Instead it becomes a book about “calling.”

What does it mean to have a calling? The very concept sounds gentile. Isn't a calling something that Christians have before they become clergy? But we Jews are also called. In fact, the midrashic collection Leviticus Rabbah wonders what's so special about God calling Moses. After all, God called Adam, God called Noah, God called Abraham. Indeed, God called Moses in the book of Exodus, back at the burning bush. So why do we now have the language of calling as an introduction to all of the Levitical rules?

Here we need to look at the word *va-yikra* itself—specifically, at how the word is written in a Torah scroll:

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If the word is written correctly, the four letters to the right are much bigger than the one letter to the left. That tiny letter is *alef*. Odd, isn't it, to have a tiny letter tacked on to a word like that? And *alef* is a big deal, after all. It is the first

letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the first letter of the Ten Commandments. You would expect it should be a big deal.

This brings me back to the concept of a calling. What does it mean to be called to something? Are you called to your profession? Are you called to your family? Are you called to service to your community? Are you, perhaps, called to do great things? To be famous? What can we learn from one word in the Torah that is written in an unusual way?

I suggest that to be called requires a certain amount of diminishment. In order to be called, we need to make ourselves a bit smaller. I pointed out above that *alef* is the first letter of the Ten Commandments. The first word, the one *alef* heads, is the word *anokhi*, “I.” The first commandment, as enumerated by Jewish tradition, begins, “I am the Lord thy God.” The pronoun *I* begins with *alef*. And in order to be called to serve God, we need to learn to diminish the *alef*, make our own “I” smaller so that we can commune with the “I” of God. When God calls us, we must make ourselves humble before the Creator of all things.

When Moses was called to deliver the laws of Leviticus, it required diminishment on his part. He, Moses, who spoke with God face-to-face, would *not* be the high priest who carried out these laws. Instead, his brother Aaron was given that privilege. The opening word of Leviticus signals to Moses that to truly be God’s messenger, to heed God’s call, he needs to shrink a bit, to lean out. In [Numbers 12:3](#), we learn, “That man Moses was very humble.” He learned the lesson of his calling: how to be a little *alef*.

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