



“Calling In”: Relationship When We Don’t Expect It

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The first verse in Vayikra seems mundane and predictable; God speaks to Moshe in the *mishkan* (tabernacle), as God does throughout much of the Torah. Yet, as we saw in Parashat Pekudei, Moshe did not expect this call.¹ The call of Vayikra is an unexpected gesture of intimacy. Through this lens, the whole book of Vayikra represents an invitation into relationship across apparent obstacles and boundaries. Vayikra asks of us: what are the ways in which we feel distant from God or others? What does it mean to hear a call beckoning us close in those very moments of distance?

In Parashat Pekudei, we explored a parable where Moshe was like a servant who built a palace at the king’s request, and expected to remain outside. We probed how it could possibly be that Moshe didn’t expect to go inside the *mishkan*. In Vayikra, we will linger on the moment of the “call” and the significance of this unexpected invitation inside.

¹ See my essay on Parashat Pekudei, “Shifting Expectations,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/shifting-expectations>.



ויקרא רבה א:ז

כך בשעה שאמ' לו הקב"ה למשה עשה לי משכן –
על דבר ודבר שהיה עושה היה כותב עליו כאשר צוה ה' את משה.
אמ' הקב"ה: כל הכבוד הזה עשה לי משה ואני מבפנים והוא מבחוץ?
קראו לו שיכנס לפנים.
לכך נאמ' "ויקרא אל משה".

Vayikra Rabbah 1:7

So too, at the time the Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, "Make Me a dwelling-place,"
on everything that he made he would write, "Just as God commanded Moshe."
The Holy Blessed One said, "All of this honor Moshe has made for me and I am inside and
he is outside?!"
He called him that he should enter inside.
Therefore it says, "and [God] called to Moshe."

The "call" to Moshe allows him to cross a boundary, just as the servant crosses a boundary into the palace he had no rights to be in. Like the servant, Moshe leaves behind an aspect of hierarchical distance in his relationship with God, forging a closer connection as an insider in God's home. God's call was an invitation into a new and unimagined stage in the intimacy of their relationship.

The formative nature of this call becomes all the more powerful when we see in another *midrash* that Moshe would relive this moment of beckoning again and again.² Through careful midrashic derivation, the Sifra concludes that God called "Moshe, Moshe" not just here but before each and every time God spoke to him.³

² I realize that this reading anachronistically reads the message of Vayikra Rabbah (compiled in the late 4th-early 5th centuries CE) onto the much earlier Sifra (compiled in the 3rd century CE). This is meant as an exercise in our own creative interpretation, and not meant as a reading of the plain sense of this Sifra passage.

³ Sifra Dibbura de-Nedavah chapter 1, paragraphs 6-7: "...מאהל מועד כל שהוא מאהל... (ז) יכול לא היתה הקריאה אלא לדברות בלבד ומנין אף לאמירות ולצוין, אמר רבי שמעון מועד נקדים בו קריאה לדיבור. ...How do we know there was a summons for every speech in תלמוד לומר דבר וידבר לרבות אף לאמירות ולצוין



One might think that this proliferation of “calling” cheapens its impact. The first call was unexpected, but after the third, or tenth or fiftieth time wouldn’t it become trivial? We can understand the significance of these many calls when we have our parable in mind. Perhaps between God’s speech acts Moshe’s anxiety or self-doubt resurfaced; he might have continually wondered whether he belonged in this relationship with God.⁴ Every time Moshe heard God calling his name, he relives the experience of that first unexpected call into the *mishkan*. Vayikra is a persistent invitation that reminds Moshe again and again that God wants to be close with him.

Indeed, the *midrash* goes on to define God’s call of “Moshe, Moshe” as an expression of love. The proliferation of God’s loving calls to Moshe becomes a literary parallel to the servant-architect who inscribed the king’s name everywhere, and the Torah’s refrain, “Just like God commanded Moshe,” for each part of the *mishkan*. We might have understood this as a demonstration of obedience, but now it carries the valence of love—or even infatuation. Moshe invoked God’s name repeatedly in setting up the *mishkan* as he longed to be back in relationship. God calls Moshe’s name again and again, as a repeated expression of a desire to be close.

This reading of Vayikra evokes the way a parent recites their child’s name obsessively, or the thrill of speaking your lover’s name, or hearing a lover speak your name. Vayikra holds the sense of intimacy that comes with knowing that another person consistently wants to be close to you, to grow with you. The continued “naming” by the other bears witness to an evolving self; each time the name is articulated, it is with new knowledge of who this person is and what it means to love them.

the Torah? The verse teaches, “From the tent of meeting”—in all cases from the tent of meeting, a summons preceded the speech act... How do we know it was also for statements and commands? Rabbi Shimon said: The verse teaches “Speak, And He spoke”—to include statements and commands...

⁴ This is certainly how he felt at the beginning of his journey, at the burning bush (see Exodus 3-4).



Another part of the Sifra passage relates to this kind of evolving identity:

ספרא דבורא דנדבה פרק א, פיסקא יב

דבר אחר משה משה הוא משה עד שלא נדבר עמו, הוא משה משנדבר עמו.

Sifra Dibbura de-Nedavah chapter 1, paragraph 12

Another explanation, “Moshe, Moshe”—he was Moshe before God spoke with him, and he was Moshe after God spoke with him.

This cryptic interpretation speaks to both the deepening and stability of Moshe’s identity as God spoke with him regularly. Being open to deep relationship, with God or with another person, can be a daunting proposition. The kind of vulnerability it requires—and possibility for self-reflection and change—demands a degree of courage, risk, and stamina to face what could be a disorienting experience. This *midrash* reassures us that Moshe’s intimate encounters with God did not overwhelm his sense of self. Moshe evolves more into becoming Moshe by virtue of this relationship.

The experience of this kind of loving intensity in relationship with God doesn’t end with Moshe. Rashi draws on these *midrash* traditions when introducing Sefer Vayikra so that the sense of God’s love frames our own encounter with this new book of the Torah. In fact, Rashi generally highlights God’s love in his comments at the beginning of each book of the Torah, recreating for us the midrashic reality Moshe experienced.⁵ Each time we open up the Torah to read God’s words—at the beginning of every “divine utterance”—the words themselves

⁵ This is most prominent in Shemot (להודיע חבתם, וימנאם במיתתם, חזר וימנאם בחייהם בשמותם, Vayikra (see above), and Bemidbar (מתוך חבתן לפניו מונה אותם כל שעה). In Devarim, Rashi doesn’t invoke the word “love” specifically in the very beginning, but emphasizes God’s respect for Israel even in the context of rebuke (לפי שהן דברי תוכחות ומנה כאן כל המקומות שהכעיסו לפני המקום בהן, לפיכך סתם את הדברים והזכירם ברמז מפני כבודן של ישראל). Note also that Rashi’s comment on ודי זהב refers to a passage of Talmud that stresses Israel’s innocence and blames God for their sin (Berakhot 32a). Additionally, Rashi refers to חבה in Devarim 1:15. In Bereishit 1:1, Rashi refers to Israel as being God’s “first” or “choice” people (ראשית).



must be embedded in this loving relational stance. We can only encounter words of Torah if we can hear God calling our own names first. And, we will hopefully come to know the potential of our names and selves more deeply by virtue of this call into Torah.

The book of Vayikra beckons us into the deepest of relationships. Its many details, when framed within the valence of love, offer pathways to navigate the complexities of intimacy, whether on a divine or interpersonal level. What we learn from the parable of the servant-architect who never expected to be invited inside is that the possibility for intimacy can traverse what we perceive as impenetrable boundaries and obstacles. A relationship of *kedushah* (sanctity) integrates those parts of life that might feel most overwhelming or isolating; our experiences of gratitude, guilt, sexuality, birth, death, illness all become catalysts to step deeper into relationship with God and others, and to strengthen our ever evolving sense of self.

