

Parshat Vayikra 5774/2014
How do we come close to God?

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“Close is God to those who call upon Him; to those who call upon Him in truth” (Psalm 145).

In the Kedushah we say that the holy angels cry out to one another:

“One called out to the other saying: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory” (Isaiah 6)

It is a verse that seems to state two diametrically opposed theological statements. How can God be elevated in the heavens as Holy? How can God also fill the world with his presence? Now I am comfortable with the concept of God as transcendent, far away, above galaxies, but it is a little unnerving to think everything in our material world could be God – the light places, the dark places, the mundane, the beautiful and the ugly. Is God in this lectern? Is God in my shoe? How can God be described in two different ways? Is there a difference between a God who is not material, a mystery within the hosts of the heavens, and a God who is material – belonging to everything that exists? And if there is no difference, how do access that part of God that is me? Where does my soul and God connect?

That is the question the Book of Leviticus addresses. Literally from the Hebrew, it is the “Book of He Called.” It is not the most exciting book in the Torah. The word Leviticus in Latin means “manual for the Levites.” It is technical with little narrative, not like the books of Genesis and Exodus that we have read until this point. The Tzror Hamor, a mystical Medieval commentary, tells us that Leviticus is paired with Genesis (and not with Exodus which concludes with the description of the Mishkan) for it addresses the longing of the soul in its connection with God and the falling away from God in the soul’s failure within community.

A clue to the book’s spiritual intent comes in the opening words as it introduces the book’s content:

“He called to Moses and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting saying – ‘Speak to the Jewish people and say to them:

When Adam [you] bring a *korban* (a nearness offering) for yourselves, whether it is an animal from the larger herd or the smaller flock, you shall bring [it as] your *korban*.”

It is a very wordy way for the Torah to express a simple instruction. Why not just say:

“God commanded Moses to order the people to bring *korbanot* from their herds and flocks?”

Why is there all this florid and lengthy language about an undefined “He” calling to Moses then speaking as God to him within a tent? He then identifies the Jewish people as the recipient of these words calling them collectively as “Adam” and then switches to the second person plural. He then uses the word “korban” derivative of the word for “closeness” or “nearness” in Hebrew to name the experience of slaughtering a large or small farm animal. Obviously, there are a number of things going on here but I am going to touch on a few to demonstrate that we are entering a mystical terrain in how souls can really be connected to the Everywhere God.

We should first note the word “Vayikra” is like the word “Kra” in the Isaiah’s vision. Rashi observes the similarity and says that “Kra” is a word of endearment. In Isaiah it is used to describe a loving embrace of angels who call to one another in their longing for the Transcendent God. Here in “Vayikra,” it is also a term of intimacy that might be more suggestive of a bride calling for her bridegroom within her bed chamber. Intimacy doesn’t have to mean sexual intimacy. “Kra” here is the language of invitation to knowing. “Kra” elides with vocation as a calling as in the scene at the burning bush. God called from Moses from within the bush (Exodus 3:4). “Kra” is a word that asks us to embark on something, initiate a project that reciprocates God’s love for us. The soul turns inward and upward to God. A call is seeking a response. Hence the title of the Book: “The Book of He Called.” God is waiting for our response.

The *Tzror Hamor* explains why this book is connected to the Book of Genesis. The word “Adam” suggests that the “call” is a call to the Biblical Adam to right his relationship with God. Genesis is about the descending diminutive status of the human being (literally, the Earthling) in the beginning of the world. It is true that the family of Abraham is seeded in the world as hope for a better humanity but even as his family expands there are problems. The narrative is about a world that is continuously falling apart descending into evil and chaos at every step. At the beginning, God was “at home” in the garden of Eden as the text describes God “strolling in the garden at breezy part of the day” (Genesis 3:8). Now God is a transcendent point from the earth. The world is yet filled with His presence.

This alienation of God comes to brief halt when God intervenes within human history to save the Hebrew slaves, birth the nation of Israel, and show his Presence at Mount Sinai. Then, as in other Genesis stories, the narrative reaches a denouement at the episode of the Golden Calf. God wants to dissolve the People but Moses pleads with God to forgive and start again. God says, “Okay but in order for a human being to really feel My Presence, he or she must follow these directions...” And thus is born the Book of Leviticus. It is a Guide to Spiritual Discipline. Leviticus is the re-authoring of a people, a starting over just like stories we read in Genesis. The key part of the spiritual discipline will be this nearness offering, the *korban*.

We can imagine that both God and Moses approach each other tentatively – will this really work? This is yet another reason to start with “Vayikra,” “He Called.” Notice the small alef at the end of the word “Vayikra.” Midrashim say that Moses is feeling

unworthy of being a prophet and leader to such a group of idolaters. We should also ask if God feels diminished in the same way descending yet again from his lofty place to fill the space of the Tent of Meeting within the Mishkan? How bold we once were when we spelled the word “Beresheet” (In the Beginning) with a supersize “Bet?”

In any case, the message is “You fallible Adam, I know you are fallible and yet you can come closer to me. I don’t care how rich you are or how poor you are; whether you are a laborer or a prince. I will tell you how you will each bring an animal of your herd or your flock and put it to death on the altar.”

What is the connection between the animal’s death and the human soul longing for God in his or her life? By being in touch with the mortality of flesh, the soul associates grief and loss again and again, feeling the “finger of God” pointing at the soul as if to say “your soul is mine; you are reliant on Me alone.” You are aware of the capacity of your soul in this life. Your soul growth begins with a calling to fulfill itself in this world.

Never has this ritual idea come home to me so profoundly when I once stood on line with a crate of live chickens waiting for the schochet to slaughter each of them. I watched as the schochet slit the throat of each chicken, turned each upside down within a funnel over a trough below. I watched as the blood, the stuff of life, poured out of each chicken, and how the chicken kicked its feet until it was dead. The dying and deadness worked its way into my body and finally into my soul. The experience helped me narrow my mind and helped me appreciate the life that I often take for granted.

To be present with dying and death in creatures that are much closer to us than the falling leaves from a tree or a dying flower are a way to feel closer to the divine momentum that flows through all life. We are closer to that mystical energy when we witness the event for ourselves, with property that belongs to us, to those who we cherish, to life that we too must jettison one day. We are called out for our purpose in this special book to reflect on the lives we are leading. We are called out to move even closer, if not out to a material God then inward to the living trace of God’s Presence that rests in our souls. When we see the world differently and show reverence for the whole earth then will the earth be filled with God’s Presence that will be palpable to all of us.