

ALSO BY ARTHUR GREEN

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Spiritual
Teachings
from
around

the Maggid's Table

Volume
1

Genesis • Exodus • Leviticus

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ויקרא

Va-Yikra

ME'OR 'EYNAYIM I

He called to Moses; Y-H-W-H spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.

(LEV. 1:1)

The matter is thus: Blessed Y-H-W-H brought us forth from Egypt. Right then He gave us the commandments of Passover and circumcision. Then He split the sea for us, afterwards walking us through the wilderness, leading with a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. Then he gave us the Torah and after that commanded us to erect a Tabernacle so that "I might dwell within them" (Ex. 25:8). Scripture does not say "within it," but "within them."

This is like a person who has always dwelt in a place of darkness, never having seen light. If you brought him right out into daylight, he would not be able to stand the brightness. You have to expose it to him gradually. First you make a narrow opening, so that he can see just a bit of light. Then you broaden it until it becomes a window. Only then can you take him out into the open air and show him the light.

So it was with Israel. In Egypt they were immersed in fifty measures of defilement. Had He shown them the brilliance of His presence immediately, they would not have been able to bear it. They needed all these steps along the way. But the whole purpose was "Let them make Me a Tabernacle that I might dwell within them."



The author is introducing his homilies to *Va-Yikra*, trying to show why this book lies at the center of the Torah. He uses a version of the well-known parable of the man dwelling in a cave (deriving from Plato's *Republic*) as a way of saying that all the Torah's narrative has been leading up to this point: the moment of the call to serve. The whole story of Exodus, including the elaborate instructions for the Tabernacle, is preparation for "He called to Moses."

So too our own narratives. All of our life stories up to this moment are there to prepare us for that call. The Hasidic reading of *be-tokham* as "within them," rather than "in their midst," means that the call comes to each person. The Tabernacle is being prepared within our heart; it is from there that the word calls to us. Everything else leads up to this.

ME'OR 'EYNAYIM II

He called to Moses; Y-H-W-H spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.

(LEV. 1:1)

Our sages taught: "When a person is walking through a dangerous place [and cannot stop to recite his prayers in full], he should recite a short prayer, saying: 'In every time of passage, may their needs come before You.' On this passage the Talmud comments: 'Even when they turn toward transgression [*ibbur/averah*], may their needs be revealed to You'" (b. Berakhot 28b). [The "danger" is taken to be the danger of sinning.]

God is present in reduced form within every one of Israel. Even the most wicked person contains God's presence. This is seen in the fact that every sinner has some flashes of conscience. This is God calling out and saying: "Return to Me!" But the person just doesn't understand that this is blessed Y-H-W-H calling out to him.

That is why **He called to Moses** is written with a miniature *aleph*. God the cosmic *aleph* is present in miniature form within each Israelite, calling us to return. These are our pangs of conscience, but we do not perceive them as God's own call to us. Thus **He called** is written anonymously in our verse. But when the person understands that this is the voice of God and turns back toward the Creator, then **Y-H-W-H spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting**. When you go to commit a sin and God prevents you from doing so by some means, this too is God speaking to you,

calling out: "Come back to Me! How long will you chase after your trivial pursuits?"

This is the "short prayer" the rabbis meant (b. Berakhot 3a). Pray to "shorten" or cut off those forces that separate you from God. "Save Your people, O Y-H-W-H, even when they turn toward transgression!"



The call of God is present in each of our lives. None of us, despite both our sinfulness and our claims of disbelief, is so far from God that we have no voice of conscience. But recognizing conscience as the voice of our Creator, speaking at first "anonymously" within us, and identifying that call as belonging to the One who has created us and creates us again in each moment—that can be a long journey indeed. We need a "short prayer" for that moment—one that will shorten our journey to that recognition and the change in our lives for which it calls.

NO'AM ELIMELEKH I

He called to Moses; Y-H-W-H spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.

(LEV. 1:1)

It looks as if it would have been better to write, "God called out to Moses and spoke to him," so we knew who called Moses, rather than the existing form of the verse, which is not specific and leaves the identity of the caller unknown.

This can be understood based on the following teaching of the *Zohar* regarding the miniature *aleph* written at the end of the word *va-yikra*. It is small when the *shekhinah* is out of place (1:239a).

Our verse describes the time the people were in the desert rather than at the central place of God's glory, the Temple of Jerusalem. The verse therefore begins with **He called Moses**, implying that She [the *shekhinah*], the miniature *aleph* called out to Moses. But following the initial call, Moses turned to the service of the Creator with all his power, sanctified himself greatly, and achieved the rung of **Y-H-W-H spoke to him**, [Y-H-W-H being] the divine name of compassion.

This is also the meaning of King David's prayer "You Y-H-W-H are enthroned forever" (Ps. 102:13). In our times, due to our sins, the *shekhinah*

is in exile. Therefore, when intending to judge the people of Israel, the Holy Blessed One, out of compassion, has to rise from the throne of judgment and sit upon the throne of mercy. In contrast, the messianic time will be an era of absolute compassion, and there will be no need to rise from the throne of judgment and shift from one throne to the other.

This hope is expressed here and in the prayer "You Y-H-W-H are enthroned forever; Your throne endures for all generations" (Lam. 5:19). *Shekhinah's* glory is [still] present among the righteous. The prayer offered is that despite the decline of the generations (b. Shabbat 112b), may Your throne be upon us in every generation, and in your great compassion may the light of Your presence hover over us. Amen.



As opposed to our Temple-centered past or our messianic future, our current reality is that of exile. In this reality it is human effort that determines whether God will manifest in harsh judgment or in expansive compassion. In this teaching the Hasidic master has transformed the lament over the destruction of the Temple into a prayer that the righteous people succeed in their work of being the seat of divine compassion in the world.

MAGGID DEVARAV LE-YA'AKOV (#97)

... a fire-offering, a pleasing aroma to Y-H-W-H.
(LEV. 1:9)

The world was created only for the sake of the blessed Holy One's delight and the pleasure God takes in our doing of the *mitsvot*. God speaks and God's will is done. The essence of that pleasure lies in our ecstatic anticipation of doing that which pleases God, fulfilling the divine will. The deed itself is not the essence. Indeed sometimes a person studies Torah just because of an inclination to do so, the same way others pursue business, each following their own desires. What difference is there between them?

God's essential pleasure lies in our desire to serve. Scripture says: "Y-H-W-H your God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24). Read it to mean "A God who consumes fire!" God's main sustenance and pleasure in the commandments is that of our passion's fire in doing them. It is a **fire-offering, a pleasing aroma to Y-H-W-H....**

But enthusiasm alone has nothing in which to garb itself. For that it needs the deed.



The Hasidic rebalancing of religious values is here presented very clearly. "Ecstatic anticipation" is the real point—our burning desire to do God's will, which rises to heaven.

KEDUSHAT LEVI

If a person offends and performs any one of the commandments of Y-H-W-H that should not be done, and is guilty...

(LEV. 4:27)

[What is "a commandment of Y-H-W-H that should not be done"?] It is well established that when serving God properly, you should think little about yourself and more about the grandeur of the blessed Creator. However, if a person performs a *mitsvah* and thinks that he does so perfectly, God disregards the *mitsvah*. This is the meaning of the statement **If a person offends**. What is the offense? The person performs the *mitsvah* in a manner that it **should not be done**. Meaning, God disregards this *mitsvah* because of the person's attitude, but the individual assumes that he serves God properly. It is for this reason that he is **guilty**.



What is more important, the performance of a *mitsvah* or the attitude one has when performing it? This is a subject of ongoing conversation throughout Jewish intellectual history. While the early Hasidic masters place great value on the performance of the *mitsvot*, they are most concerned about *kavvanah*—the inner intention of the person carrying out the commandments. Here Levi Yitshak warns us about the danger of becoming self-satisfied in our service of God. Our spiritual practice should engender in us a deep sense of humility as we grow in our awareness of God's infinity and our finitude. The Berdichever intends this teaching to *serve* as a warning against haughtiness, but as he warns elsewhere, we must also guard against thinking too little of ourselves, lest we become paralyzed by our imperfection.

Or if one touches a human impurity, anything that causes a person impurity, and it be hidden from him, [when later] he knows and is guilty...

(LEV. 5:3)

This alludes to an evil person who has become impure through sins and mistakes. This gives power and vitality to the supernal persona of unbounded evil.

The *tsaddik* wants such a person to turn back from sin, and not transgress any more. This is achieved by **Or if one touches**, meaning that the *tsaddik* must "touch"—turn toward this matter and deal with it in his own self....

Further, the verse teaches us that it is to be done in this way: **and it be hidden from him**—the *tsaddik* must do it in secrecy and hiding.... **[When later] he knows**: this process will become known to the sinner, who will feel the sin and be overcome by a great fear and motivation for repentance....

And is guilty [*ve-ashem*]; this means the same—the person will be devastated (*meshomam*) and confused by the act done and will not do it again.



The "supernal persona of unbounded evil" alludes to a doctrine common in the *Zohar* and particularly in the *Tikkuney Zohar* (cf. 63a, 98b) that contrasts supernal figures of good and evil. The alignment of positive forces in the universe creates the supernal figure of good, while the alignment of negative forces creates the evil figure. Just as good deeds of people strengthen and give life to the cosmic figure of good, evil deeds strengthen and give life to the cosmic figure of evil. The *No'am Elimelekh* proposes that the motivation to bring change into other people's lives should be based on an awareness of the cosmic impact of each individual life.

In this piece the *No'am Elimelekh* offers a mode of bringing about change that is directed first inward rather than outward. Rather than beginning by attempting to uproot the "impurity" in the sinner, the *No'am Elimelekh* asks the would-be spiritual leader to approach and reach the aspect of impurity that he/she is trying to change in others in his/her own self.

This is a form of activism that seems not to involve active outreach at all. The specific work addressing the evil the spiritual leader wants to change is done in the privacy of inner soul work. This inner work will ultimately impact the leader's interactions with the world, and through this inner process he/she will facilitate development in others as well. In order to do this, we who seek to lead others first have to find the very evil we are trying to change within our own selves.

Va-Yikra Round Two

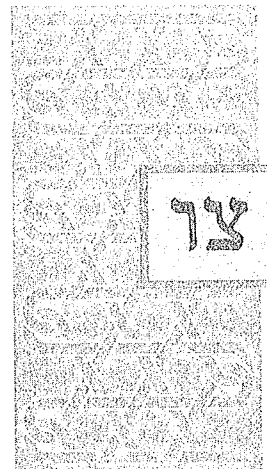
AG: The call to Moses gives the Hasidic authors, and us as well, a chance to reflect on the notion of divine call. Much of their reflection concentrates on this single opening word of the *parashah* and the book. What does it mean to be called by God? Does it happen only in biblical times, in literal descriptions like those of Abraham, Moses, and Samuel? Or is any life of devotion a response to God's call, even if it is not heard in words?

The word "vocation" (lit. "calling") is not used very often among Jews attracted to a life in the rabbinate or other positions of Jewish spiritual leadership. I wonder why not. Are we too afraid to sound "prophetic" in describing our own lives? And is that a healthy modesty or an unhealthy awkwardness about expressing our own faith?

EL: I think we have a healthy fear of people hearing the voice of God insofar as it represents an absolute authority that is beyond human judgment. Yet the Hasidic masters may be offering an alternative. When the *No'am Elimelekh* or the *Kedushat Levi* stress the ways in which people influence God's manifestation in the world, the absolute authority of "God's word" is somewhat muted by the recognition that we can only access it through our individual human prism. Given this awareness, is it still meaningful to refer to such a calling as "God's voice"?

OR: Much as I struggle with my own understanding of who or what God is, the metaphor of God's call remains compelling to me. This is true both in my private life and in my life as a Jewish professional. In this context the term "discernment" has been helpful. Like "calling," this word is used much more widely in Christian circles than in Jewish

ones. Discernment, as I understand it, requires that we set aside time to explore our core values and commitments and the needs of the world around us. In my experience, much of this practice involves listening—to the wisdom of our sacred traditions, to the voices of trusted conversation partners, and to our own inner voices. As vague as it may sound, I feel comfortable talking about such experiences as attuning myself to “God’s call.”



Tsav

OR TORAH

Y-H-W-H spoke to Moses, saying: “Command Aaron and his sons, saying: “This is the Torah of the ascending-offering, the offering on its stake upon the altar, all night until the morning the altar’s fire shall be lit upon it.... Fire shall constantly burn upon it; it shall not go out.”

(LEV. 6:1–2, 6)

RaSHI says that the word “command” here shows a special urging, applicable now and in all generations. Said Rabbi Shim’on: Such urging is especially needed when there is a cost to the pocketbook.

If this passage is to be understood in its simple sense, why is “special urging” needed in order to command two daily sacrifices? What “cost to the pocketbook” is there for these two single communal offerings by the whole people of Israel? The additional sacrifices were much more costly! And how are these “applicable now and in all generations”? The two daily sacrifices were ended when the Temple was destroyed.

We therefore must interpret this passage to conform with our sages’ teaching that “whoever studies Torah is like one who offers all the sacrifices” (b. Menahot 110a). **This is the Torah of the ascending-offering** [means that Torah itself rises as an offering]. You may read this entire passage as pointing in that direction. **Command Aaron and his sons, saying: “This is the Torah of the ascending-offering”** ... “special urging ... in all