

## Sermon | Parshat Vayikra

March 23, 2024

Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz

B'nai Israel Congregation

### Into the Unknown

It's too bad that my daughter isn't in the room right now because I think she could easily lead us in singing "Into the Unknown," one of the best songs on the soundtrack of *Frozen II*, as performed by Idina Menzel. It is safe to say that I have watched the movie close to one hundred times, if not more. It was the only thing that my daughter would watch during those first few months of COVID when Rebecca and I were figuring out how to keep our full-time jobs while raising a one-year-old without any childcare options whatsoever. It is not an understatement to say that *Frozen II* helped us keep our jobs, and our sanity. But the reason I mention it today is because the song perfectly encapsulates what I believe Moses is feeling in the opening verse of Parshat Vayikra. (Yes, I am comparing Moses to Elsa...). In the movie, Elsa is seeking a voice that has called out to her from a distant place. She does not yet know from where the voice comes, nor does she know why it is calling her. Elsa struggles with whether to step forward and seek out this voice, or turn away and avoid its call. She sings,

I'm sorry, secret siren, but I'm blocking out your calls

I've had my adventure, I don't need something new

I'm afraid of what I'm risking if I follow you

Into the unknown.

Before her is this great unknown, both intriguing *and* terrifying. It draws her forward, and gives her pause. It is a risk to keep going, and the reward is unclear. The same seems to be true for Moses.

The Book of Leviticus, which we started to read this morning, begins,

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

[GOD] called to Moses

And God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting...<sup>1</sup>

If we can manage to set aside momentarily the challenging content of Parshat Vayikra, full of sacrificial laws that are so distant from our lived reality of Jewish life, then we can instead focus upon the challenging grammar with which the Book of Leviticus begins. First of all, the opening verb has no subject: *Vayikra* can be translated as “He called” or “It called” and we have to infer from the context that “He” or “It” is God. Then there is the doubling of the verbs for speaking for just a few words later we read *Vayidaber Adonai*, “and God spoke to Moses.” Why does God need to “call” and then “speak?” And I haven’t mentioned the strange feature of the tiny *aleph* in the word *vayikra* as it is written in the Torah. In other words, one could speak at length about this particular *parsha* without addressing the issue of animal sacrifice at all.

The early *midrashim* and commentaries address these grammatical peculiarities. One of my favorites is from Midrash Tanchuma. The *midrash* tells us that Moses stood outside of the Tent of Meeting because he was afraid to enter, שִׁהָיָה מִתְיָרָא לְבֹא. God, on the other hand, was inside the Tent of Meeting, waiting for Moses to enter. Noticing Moses’ reticence, God says in the *midrash*, “It isn’t right that Moses, who built the Tabernacle, should stand outside while I am within, so I must call upon him to enter.”<sup>2</sup> And that is why God must first call Moses, *vayikra*, and only after that can God speak to him, *vayidaber*. I love this image of Moses standing outside of the Tabernacle, unsure of his next move. We have to read this in its context, not as the first verse of this central book of the Torah, but as the verse which follows the last few verses of Exodus. There, Moses completes the building of the Tabernacle and is unable to go inside of it because the Presence of God fills the entire space, וְלֹא-יָכֹל

---

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 1:1.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vayikra 1:1.

מֹשֶׁה לָּבֹא אֶל-אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד.<sup>3</sup> If we keep that image in mind when we read this week's first verse, then we understand why Moses needs an invitation from God before entering the Tent of Meeting. God's Divine Presence was overwhelmingly powerful and filled the entire space. It appeared that Moses that he could not enter. He was in awe and perhaps, as the *midrash* suggests, even afraid to step forward into the unknown. Surely Moses knew how to communicate with God—they did so at Sinai—but Moses had never been in a closed, confined space with the omnipotent and omniscient God of the Hebrews. He was afraid to get so close in this intimate and personal space of God. He was afraid of the unknown.

I imagine that all of us can relate. Fear of the unknown is normal. We are comfortable with what we know, and we often balk at the opportunity to willingly stepping into a place of discomfort. Fear protects us. It is a survival instinct that keeps us out of harm's way. But at other times fear is what holds us back and inhibits us from reaching our fullest potential, from doing something important that must be done, from taking risks and challenging ourselves and doing what is right.

It has been 169 days since 253 Israelis—men, women, and children—were brutally kidnapped from their homes and brought to Gaza as hostages. Some were released around Thanksgiving. Others have been confirmed dead. And the fate of about half of the hostages remains unknown. Rescuing the hostages and demanding that the international community work for their safe release has become one of the rallying cries of the Jewish community here and in Israel. Rabbi Safra, Rabbi Schnitzer, and I have all stood in front of the Embassy of Qatar alongside allies and friends from JCRC to demand the immediate and safe release of the hostages. Rabbi Stone, Uriel Lin, and I volunteered with a group of synagogue members to build the “Empty Shabbat Table” on the National Mall, raising awareness of the plight of the hostages and similarly calling for their swift and safe release. We have updated our sign on Montrose Road to include a slide with the recognizable sign #BringThemHomeNOW. I say all of this to

---

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 40:35.

remind you all that not only are we keeping this issue at the forefront of our efforts, but we ask that you join us and do the same. I have anxiously watched and read coverage of the most recent round of negotiations to release the hostages, which at least as of yesterday afternoon are ongoing. David Barnea, the Mossad chief, flew to Qatar yesterday to meet with the CIA director, the Qatari Prime Minister, and Egyptian intelligence officials. The Israeli government faces ever-increasing pressure from the families of the hostages and a great deal of Israeli society at large to do what must be done to safely bring the hostages home. But I do not envy Israeli leaders at this time. They are undoubtedly entering into the unknown. The cries of innocent hostages call out to us all and demand that we take action. And yet we also know that stepping forward to literally negotiate with terrorists brings with it incredible risks and so many unknowns. What will be the price for their freedom? What repercussions might Israel face in the long-term? How will this impact another important goal of this war, the dismantling of Hamas?

I strongly believe that Israel must work to bring the hostages home now. *Pidyon shevuyyim*, the redemption of captives, is an essential *mitzvah* in our tradition, so much so that the Talmud calls it a *מצוה רבה*, a great mitzvah.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, there are parameters within which it operates, but I find it hard to imagine that there are still people in this world who cannot support the safe and immediate release of Israeli civilians, including elderly people and infants. And that is why we must hear their cries and, like God calling to Moses, we must call to those with power and authority to step forward into the unknown, to take this great risk of negotiating with people we do not trust. We must do this in good faith, we must step forward while recognizing our real and legitimate fears because stepping forward and entering into the unknown is, in this moment, the right thing to do. May all of those still held hostage be safely and speedily returned to their families. Shabbat shalom, and *Am Yisrael Chai*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Bavli Bava Batra 8b.