



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai

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Failing to Hear God's Call

By Carole Daman

Sefer Vayikra begins with an invitation and ends with a warning of alienation.

According to *Ramban*, the *Sefer* sets forth laws meant to protect the intimate relationship God has with *Bnei Yisroel*. In the first verse, *Hashem* calls (*vayikra*) to *Moshe* from the *Mishkan*, which has been built by *Bnei Yisroel* so that *Hashem* may dwell among them. In the Torah, *vayikra* is written with a small aleph leading commentators including *Rashi* and the *Baal HaTurim* to reflect on the difference between God calling *Moshe* (*vayikra*) and God just "happening upon" (*vayikar*) *Balaam*.

In the final *parshiyot* of *Vayikra* that we read this week, we find out that if we view God's commandments and the events of the world with a *vayikar* attitude of casualness, assuming that everything is a product of happenstance, *Hashem* will treat us in the same manner and thrust us out of the Land of Israel. The word that describes this attitude, *keri*, appears seven times in this section and nowhere else in the *Tanach*. It is related to the word *vayikar* which describes not only *Balaam's* prophetic encounter but also *Amalek's* attack on *Bnei Yisroel*. This attack, *Chazal* tell us, had the effect of delaying the universal recognition of *Hashem's* kingship.

In *Bechukotai*, *Bnei Yisroel* are warned that they will be punished for treating God with *keri*, failing to obey God's laws and acting in a way that does not recognize that He is in control of the world. The rebuke is divided into five sections. *Keri* is not mentioned until the third section since its usage indicates that the people are oblivious to the fact that the earlier punishments are meant to give them an impetus to repent. In the fourth and final sections, the word *keri*

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refers not only to the people's behavior but also to God's response. In the final stage, God's *keri* is linked to His anger in the phrase *b'chamat keri*. The verse describing this situation (*Vayikra* 26:28) is cited by *Rambam* both in *Hilchot Taaniyot* 1:1-3 and in the *Moreh Nevuchim*. There he explains that if a community does not recognize the need for repentance when faced with adverse events saying "this trouble is mere happenstance," more troubles will come upon it.

The final result of *Bnei Yisroel's* failure to repent is exile, and the Torah tells us four times that after *Bnei Yisroel* have been expelled, the land will make up for the *shemita* years that have not been observed. This leads several commentators to suggest that the failure to observe *shemita* is the major sin for which the people will be punished. According to Rabbi David Fohrman, the failure to observe *shemita* is similar to the sin that caused Adam and Eve to be expelled from *Gan Eden*. Like eating from the only tree in the garden that God had set aside, it shows an unwillingness to recognize that the land belongs to God.

I believe it is significant that we celebrate *Yom Haatzmaut* and *Yom Yerushalayim* in the same month that we read *Behar* and *Bechukotai*. We have been privileged to live in an age when *Am Yisroel* has returned to *Eretz Yisroel* and *Yerushalayim*. It is incumbent upon us to be grateful for these blessings and to realize that they are more than the accidents of history.

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Carole and her late husband, Dr. Harlan Daman z"l, moved to the community in 1986. She follows in the footsteps of her children, Gila and Avi, who years ago as teenagers wrote *Divrei Torah* in the YIS weekly bulletin.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?
Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

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