

The Voice That Pierces the Heart

Parashat Vayikra, 5779

Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, opens with a call:

וַיִּקְרָא אֲלֵהֶם

(א) וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי יְיָ יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֶרְבָּן לִי

Leviticus 1:1

(1) The One [SOMEONE?] called to Moses and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: “Any human who will sacrifice an offering [also: create closeness] to God...

Before Parashat Vayikra, the opening chapters of this book, which describes the sacrifices that will be offered on the Mishkan in great detail, even really begins in earnest, it throws a puzzle at us, saying:

“וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה” (*And _____ called to Moses*). There is no subject there!

Who calls out to Moses? The text goes on to say “וַיְדַבֵּר יי אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל

מוֹעֵד”, *God spoke to Moses from the Tent of Meeting*, where the

Mishkan/Tabernacle had just been completed. So if God spoke to

Moses, and we assume that the first three words are also referring to the

Holy Blessed One, why did God need to call out in addition to speaking with Moses?

If you look back at the way Sefer Shemot (The Book of Exodus) ended, everyone is already gathered around the Tent of Meeting as God's Presence descends on it. They are all, assumedly, paying attention and focused on this critical moment when all of their hard work in building this holy space, this sanctuary, has come to fruition. So why does God need to reach out to Moses in the midst of this communal gathering?

Rashi dives right in and, quoting the Sifra, the midrashic commentary on Sefer Vayikra, explains it in two different ways. Perhaps God had a special affection for Moshe, and wanted to call out to him in particular, much as prophets are called to action throughout the Tanakh. But if this is were the case, why would God not call out to everyone and recognize Moses before the community? Why draw him away from this sacred moment?

I find Rashi's second argument slightly more compelling based on other texts that support it. Rashi reads this call to indicate to us that God's Voice went forth out of the Tent of Meeting, but only Moses was in the right frame of mind and to recognize the call and to respond

appropriately by paying attention and taking some needed action to move the people forward toward a new definition of holiness and spiritual life.

Incidentally, this is not the only time that this special attunement to God's Presence has been ascribed to Moses. When he encounters the Burning Bush in Shemot 3:2, the midrash Shemot Rabba says that many other shepherds were also in the fields tending their flocks but that Moses alone saw something extraordinary in this miraculous bush, and decided to turn from his tasks and move toward it. (Shemot Rabba, Parashah 2:5) And at the start of Parashat Vayikra as well, our midrash claims that once God's Presence fully settled into this newly constructed sacred space, a call went out in every direction, but that only Moses responded. Thus, instead of giving the entire people the instructions for the many different types of sacrifices for which they would individually and collectively responsible, God gives these directions solely to Moses and tasks him with explaining these acts of worship to the Jewish People.

And what are these instructions truly supposed to help B'nai Yisrael do together? What are these *korbanot* (קרבנות), listed here in exhaustive detail, and usually translated as a “sacrifices”? The very word means “an act of drawing near,” and in fact the word “sacrifice” comes from the same Latin root as “sacred.” To offer something of yourself is to reach out and to create a holy space to meet the Divine Other that rests in the soul of every human other. This is why we have a Tent of MEETING.

Imagine the scene: The Jewish People have gathered all of their resources, all of their skills, all of their people power together and have constructed this sacred space, a sanctuary constructed for the sole purpose of bringing the Divine a little closer to them in their wanderings through life. And before their very eyes, the Creator of Time and Space makes God's self known before them and reaches out to connect.

Is that not the perfect metaphor for what we want in a sacred space: a place to connect to one another, to the Divine, to our community and to what is most sacred and important in all of us? There is a reason we call them “sanctuaries” because in an ideal world, much

as we experienced in the text as the Mishkan is completed, these worship spaces are supposed to be places of spiritual, emotional, communal, and physical safety and growth.

But sadly, we know that our world does not measure up to this ideal. Just a little more than a day ago, two mosques were infiltrated by violence and hate that led to the shooting deaths of 49 innocent souls, and the injuring of nearly 50 others. I am despondent and enraged at this act of violence and others like it. It is sadly a part of the dark and hateful mosaic that make up the picture of our modern world. It makes no difference if these abhorrent attacks happen in Sikh Temple in Oak Creek or a church in Charlottesville or a synagogue in Pittsburg or a mosque in Christchurch; there can be no place for hateful murder or violence against anyone in their houses of worship.

This was a terrorist attack on our Muslim brothers and sisters, the goal of which was to take one group of people, declare them enemies and not welcome, and attempt to push them out through fear, intimidation, and violence. It was not perpetrated by a monster, but rather by other human beings who thought that their white supremacist

vision of the world gave them the right to wage war against their neighbors when they were at their most vulnerable. It is awful and unconscionable and it should not be.

In the face of hate and ignorance, we are called to respond with acts of love and appeals for justice. Yesterday, an immense group from all over St. Louis joined together in solidarity at the Islamic Foundation Greater St. Louis to reach out to our Muslim neighbors in solidarity and compassion. I will not only continue to send my prayers and love to our fellow St. Louisans who have been so injured by these latest, horrific acts of violence, but also to continue to work together to make our communities more understanding, more just, and more connected.

We cannot only sit in our own sacred spaces and avoid thinking about the other human beings, each made in the Divine Image, who share our community and our world with us. Isaiah calls on us each year during Yom Kippur, saying “Is this the fast [the worship] God desires?!” (Isaiah 58:5-8). Are we merely to sit together and scan through the siddur and meditate on our own lives while hate swarms our streets? NO! We are called to do better, to be better, to make a better world in

every and any corner where hate and injustice threaten the lives and humanity of any other human being.

Just as the call went out from the Tent of Meeting, we are called today to seek the ways in which we will act for a more just world. Will we be like Moses, who recognized the importance of the moment, stepped away from what he was doing, and listened to the many ways in which God was asking people to draw close to God's self and to one another, or will we be too caught up with our own lives to notice?

Now is not the time to be insular and cut off from others who are different from ourselves. All people of all races, creeds, religions, cultures, gender identities, sexual orientations, educational backgrounds, income levels, or political ideologies are worthy of our care and attention and should be our partners in making this community and this world better for all of us.

Do not shrink away from this moment. Draw near to your loved ones, but also to your neighbors, to the orphan, the widow, the impoverished, and most importantly, to the one you see as "other." Talk to the people around you and get to know them. Better yet, come talk to

me, to Rabbi Arnow, to your leaders and let's find ways we can work together to fight for justice in all its forms. The more we stand together, rather than argue and separate, the stronger we will be. The more we can call out hate and, at the same time, answer with love, the better our world will be.

Shabbat Shalom.