



From Chance to Calling

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Parashat Vayikra 5786

The Book of Leviticus, Vayikra, begins: “God called (וִיקְרָא) to Moshe and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying” (Leviticus 1:1). Why does God begin with a call? What is the essence and context of this kind of summoning?

The word *vayikra* (“God called”) that opens the Book of Leviticus is not only contrasted with other, more common words for divine communications to Moshe also present in the verse—*vayedaber* (spoke) and *leimor* (saying)—but the very word is marked in the scroll: the *alef* at the end of the word is written smaller than the others. In this way, the word captures our attention, inviting us to wonder about the unique nature of its content.

Vayikra, says Rashi,¹ suggesting one aspect of its meaning, is “לשון חבה - language of affection,” and expresses that God’s call has a posture of love.

But the unique script of *vayikra*, with the small *alef* hints at additional layers of meaning, based on the similarity between *vayikra* and another word: *vayikar*, which is used for divine communication to prophets. In the imagination of the following *midrash*, the opening of the

¹ Rashi’s commentary, which we will return to below, draws from and is similar to interpretations found in Vayikra Rabbah 1, which we will come to below as well.



Book of Leviticus is intentionally contrasted with the way God addresses the prophet Bilaam in the Book of Bemidbar: “And God happened upon (*vayikar*) Bilaam, and he said to God” (Numbers 23:4) and “And God happened upon (*vayikar*) Bilaam and put a word in his mouth” (23:16). By reading these two verbs, *vayikra* and *vayikar*, against one another, the *midrash* distinguishes between two distinct modes of prophecy or divine dialogue. Put differently: these words distinguish between two states of mind that characterize those hearing the words of God.

R. Hama bar Hanina explains that *vayikar* denotes a revelation that is “half-speech”—fragmented, incomplete or half-hearted—in contrast to the “complete speech” found here in Leviticus. *Vayikra*, the call that opens Leviticus, is speech imbued with a dimension of wholeness, “whole” hearted, or perhaps conveying a “whole” and integrated idea. R. Yissakhar of Kfar Mandi goes further, suggesting that *vayikar* carries connotations of impurity, whereas the *vayikra* used with Moshe is

ויקרא רבה איג (= בראשית רבה נב:ה)

בלשון קדשה בלשון טהרה בלשון ברור בלשון שמלאכי השרת מקלסין בו להקדוש ברוך הוא, כמה דתימר (ישעיה ו, ג): וקרא זה אל זה ואמר.

Vayikra Rabbah 1:13 (= Bereishit Rabbah 52:5)

in the language of holiness, in the language of purity, in clear language—the very language with which the Ministering Angels praise the Holy Blessed One, as it is said, “And one called (*vekara*) to the other and said, [‘Holy, Holy, Holy!’]” (Isaiah 6:3).

Vayikra is understood as speech having the quality of holiness—meaning it is unique.² Rashi,

² It is not merely a language God uses to give instructions; it is the same language of “calling” used by the angels in the Divine presence in the prophet Yeshayahu’s vision: “And one called to the other” (Isaiah 6:3). It is striking that while the *vayikra* in our verse describes an act performed by God, the *midrash* chooses to illustrate its depth by pointing to the moment the angels call out to one another. In doing so, the *midrash* suggests that the word *vayikra* represents a relationship where multiple circles of connection are active at once.



in his commentary on Leviticus 1:1, adds a further dimension to the distinction between *vayikra* and *vayikar*. Rashi explains *vayikar* is speech conducted in “a language of happenstance and impurity.” For Rashi, the word *vayikra* signifies a call that is established and enduring, standing in stark contrast to a call that is merely fleeting.

The *midrash* frames this distinction—between God’s “half”-speech to Bilam and God’s “whole”-speech to Moshe—as a fundamental divide between the prophets of Israel and those of the nations. The way Bilaam himself describes his perception of his connection with the Divine could in theory transcend the social barriers of the *midrash*: “And Bilaam said... ‘Perhaps God will happen (*yikareh*) to meet me’” (Numbers 23:3). Bilaam’s words reveal his state of mind regarding his relationship with God: not only the transience of the connection but also its fundamental randomness in his eyes. As Rashi on the verse in Numbers explains: “Perhaps God will happen to meet me—God does not regularly speak with me.” In Bilaam’s experience, there is no inherent order or regularity to God’s revelation. Through this comparison, the distinction between *vayikra* and *vayikar* becomes more than just a linguistic nuance, it points to a posture of the soul. While *vayikar* represents a chance, unsystematic encounter—one that is almost incidental and temporary in nature—*vayikra* reflects a relationship built on structured, regular, and constant communication.

The word *vayikra* that opens the book, whose central theme is sacrifices (*korbanot* which comes from the word “*karov*,” meaning: “close”), serves as a directional call toward a journey of closeness. This closeness is not incidental or fleeting, but constant and enduring. It grows from love and affection. It embodies a dimension of wholeness, without hesitation or partiality.

These words echoed for me something about us, all humankind, about reality in general, and about our current reality in particular.



The Rambam (Maimonides) uses language from the realm of “*mikreh*” (chance/event, *vayikar*) to describe a worldview that stands in opposition to the act of repentance:

משנה תורה, הלכות תעניות א:ב,ג

שְׁבַזְמָן שֶׁתְּבֹא צָרָה... אִם לֹא יִזְעַקוּ וְלֹא יִרְעוּ אֶלָּא יֹאמְרוּ דְּבַר זֶה מִמְּנֵהָ הָעוֹלָם אֶרֶע לָנוּ וְצָרָה זֹאת נִקְרָה נִקְרִית. הֲרִי זֶה דֶּרֶךְ אֲכַזְרִיּוֹת וְגֹרֶמֶת לָהֶם לְהִדָּבֵק בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הָרָעִים.

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Fasts 1:2,3

When a difficulty arises ... if they do not cry out and do not scream, but say, “This matter has happened to us as is the way of the world, and this affliction has befallen us as an [unforeseen] occurrence (*nikrah nikreit*)”—behold, this is a path of cruelty, and it causes them to cleave to their evil deeds.

He explains that a worldview according to which what occurs is “the way of the world”—mere chance—is one that prevents a person from acting to change their own path, and the events unfolding in the world at large.

This encapsulates the distinction between *vayikra* and *vayikar*, between a call and mere chance. The call carries an assumption and a demand to seek out spaces of action, activity, and change available to us—perhaps even in situations where we might be inclined to say: “We have stumbled into this state,” or “That’s just the way of the world,” or “This is the hand of chance.” If, after a failure or in times of distress, we do not sink into paralyzing self-blame, but instead gently wonder what could we have done to avoid this, and what actions are now possible before us, then we position ourselves on a path toward improvement, taking critical steps to build a world where reality is not merely the hand of chance (*yad ha-mikreh*).