

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
Parshat Vayikra - Leviticus 1:1-5:26
Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis

This week we turn our attention and focus to the centerpiece of the Five Books of Moses, *Sefer Vayikra*. In Rabbinic tradition, the book is sometimes referred to as *Torat Kohanim*, “the Torah of the Priests” as it were. A healthy portion of *Vayikra* deals with the laws regarding the various *korbanot*/sacrificial offerings commanded by God. The book also deals with the functions of the Priests and Levites.

Yet, if we look at the book from a distance, we see that its central theme is *kedushah*/holiness. The pursuit of *kedushah* functions in all realms of life: holiness in serving God through *korbanot*/sacrifices; holiness in our personal behavior as the Holiness Code at the core of this book teaches; and holiness in how we live in this world, including how we treat the world itself, as well as those with whom we share it.

At the end of last week's *parshah* we read:

When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of THE ETERNAL ONE filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of THE ETERNAL ONE filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of THE ETERNAL ONE rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys. (Exodus 40:33-38)

Now, as we turn to *Vayikra*, it seems as if God is immediately calling Moses to the Tent of Meeting:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מִשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּדְבֹר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:

THE ETERNAL ONE called to Moses
and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: (Leviticus 1:1)

It is not uncommon for commentators to start by noting the small *aleph* at the end of the word *Vayikra*, trying to explain this anomaly which is found in every *Sefer Torah*. Commentators such as Rashi label this an *alef ze'ira* – an “immature” *alef* – and they understand it as a physical symbol of Moses' humility.

Studying the portion anew this year through the insights of Rabbi Chaim Leib Shmulevitz¹ in *Sichot Mussar*,² I was introduced to a teaching about the meaning of names. He begins by citing a passage from *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 1:3

Moses was called ten different names: Yered, H̄ever, Yekutiel, Avi Gedor, Avi Sokho, Avi Zano'ah . . . [He was also called] "Son of Netanel" – a son to whom the Torah was given [*shenitena*] from hand to hand . . . "The scribe" – because he was the scribe of Israel. "Levite" – because he was from the tribe of Levi. . . ³

Rav Shmulevitz teaches,

The purpose of a *shem*/name is to describe a person's essential character and qualities. We can learn this from a teaching by our Sages about God's preparing to create *adam*. In *Midrash Bereisheet Rabbah* 17:4 we read:

When the Holy One came to create *Adam*, [God] consulted with the ministering angels, saying to them, "Let us make *Adam*" (Genesis 1:26). The angels said to God: 'This being [*Adam*], what will be its nature?' God replied: 'The wisdom [of this being] will be greater than yours.'

God then brought the animals, the beasts, and the birds before them and said to them: 'What is its name of this one?' And they did not know. God then passed them before *Adam* and said: 'What is the name of this one?' *Adam* said: 'This is an ox; this is a donkey; this is a horse; this is a camel.'

[God then asked:] 'And you, what is your name?' *Adam* said: 'It is appropriate that I be called *Adam*, as I was created from the ground [*adama*].'

[God then asked further:] 'And I, what is My name?' *Adam* said: 'It is appropriate to call you *Adonai*, as You are the Lord [*adon*] over all your creatures.'

Rav Shmulevitz continues,

¹ Rabbi Chaim Leib Halevi Shmulevitz, (1902-79) was a member of the faculty of the Mirrer Yeshiva for more than 40 years, in Poland, Shanghai and Jerusalem, serving as *Rosh Yeshiva* during its sojourn in Shanghai from 1941 to 1947, and again in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem from 1965 to 1979. He is the grandson of the Alter of Novardok. His teachings are collected in *Sichot Mussar*.

² The teaching may be found in *Sichot Mussar – Sha'arei Hayyim*, pages 254ff

³ For more on the interpretation of these names, one can look to the *Midrash* passage as found in Sefaria.org: https://www.sefaria.org/Vayikra_Rabbah.1.3?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en

Our Sages teach us about the profound wisdom necessary to grant something its true name. This is among the highest levels of knowledge, one even higher than that of angels. Only human beings are capable of identifying the essence and purpose of each of My creations, thereby naming each one correctly.⁴

Rav Shmulevitz then returns to the opening of our portion, with God's calling out to Moses. Following the *Midrash* from *Vayikra Rabbah*, he teaches, "The Holy One said to Moses: As you live, from all the names that you were called, I will call you only by the name that Bitya daughter of Pharaoh called you: "She called his name *Moshe*." (Exodus 2:10). Hence we read in this week's portion, "[And God] called to *Moshe*." (Leviticus 1:1)

Surely God could have chosen any one of the names associated with Moses. Each one, as suggested by the Rabbis in the Midrash opens for us a lens on another aspect of Moses' essential character. Rav Shmulevitz is teaching us that God is honoring Pharaoh's daughter and her kindness in saving the baby Moses from drowning in the Nile. He states that Moses' life was saved only through an act of *mesirat nefesh*/self-sacrifice. Rav Shmulevitz suggests we might associate Moses' own later acts of *mesirat nefesh*/self-sacrifice with what he learned as a very young child as his life was saved by such an act. He proceeds to lay out how this series of events impacted Moses' character as he grew up to lead the children of Israel. He also offers it as a lesson for each of us, in that our own experiences in life can help to frame our character.

In *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah*⁵ we are taught:

A person has three names:
one that they are called by their parents;
one that people know them by,
and one that they acquire for themselves.

Each of us knows from our own experience that we accumulate nicknames and pet names from different people as we journey through life. Perhaps Rav Shmulevitz's teaching offers us an opportunity to reflect on the names of our own lives – and to consider by which qualities we would wish to be known.

FOR FOCUS:

- Which pet or nicknames have you been called over the course of your life thus far? Do any of them strike you as indicative of a part of what you might consider your essential character?
- Are there any *middot* which might suggest a name by which you would like to be known?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah* 7:1:3

- In what ways might you incorporate such traits into your daily living so that you will come to be more associated with these *middot*?