

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Vayikra

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
 Rochel *bas* Gedalyah *a"h*
 a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The “*Kuntz*” of Being Humble

There is a well-known anecdote related about a particular *Yamim Nora'im* (High Holy Days) experience. At one point in the service, the rabbi was apparently overcome with the emotion of the moment. He suddenly cast himself upon the floor, declaring: “*Oy, Ribbono Shel Olam (Master of the Universe), ich bin a gornisht (I am a nothing)!*”

The *shul's* president, seated nearby in his place of honor, soon followed suit. Falling to the ground, he likewise remarked: “*Oy, Ribbono Shel Olam, ich bin a gornisht!*”

That year, the officiating *chazan* (cantor) was new; imported from abroad, he was performing in this congregation for the first time. Witnessing this spectacle, he decided to adopt the practice. Bowing on the floor, he exclaimed as well, “*Ribbono Shel Olam, ich bin a gornisht!*”

But when the first two veterans beheld the *chazan's* entreaty, they were aghast. With a look of disdain, the president said, “Who does he think he is, that he calls himself a *gornisht!*”

While a fabrication, this incident actually contains a pertinent lesson. As we shall see, it could be that the president's words contain a kernel of truth.

Selective Modesty?

A striking feature of the first word of sefer Vayikra is the fact that the letter *alef* in “Vayikra” is written in the Torah in miniature form (appearing something like this: ויקרא). The Ba'al Haturim explains the significance. In communicating with Moshe, Hashem employed the term ויקרא – He called, which demonstrates closeness and affection. This stands in contrast to the way Hashem communicated with the wicked Bilam, employing the shortened term of ויקר, implying a mere chance encounter and conveying a sense of disapproval and aloofness. Moshe, taking dictation from Hashem in writing the entire Torah, was told to write the full term ויקרא at the beginning of this week's *parshah*, indicating Hashem's regard for him. In his humility, however, Moshe did not want to attribute such stature to himself. And so, as if trying to substitute the less praiseworthy version of ויקר, he minimized the final letter, the *alef*, of ויקרא.

One of the remarkable aspects of this display of humility – the commentators point out – is that in a different instance Moshe apparently acquiesced to using this term. This is not the first time the term ויקרא appears in connection with Hashem's speaking with Moshe. Way back in parshas Yisro, as the Revelation at Sinai was just getting underway, the *passuk* states: וַיִּרְדּוּ עַל-הָהָר סִינַי... וַיִּקְרָא ד' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר “And Hashem descended upon Har Sinai... and Hashem called to Moshe to the top of the mountain” (*Shemos 19:20*). There, the word is spelled out in full, with no letters reduced in size. If Moshe was uncomfortable with this term on account of his humility, why did he allow it to “go through” in this instance? Why did he wait until Parshas Vayikra to try to deflect the glory from himself?

The Virtues of... Fame and Fortune

There is a statement of Chazal that delivers what may appear to be a surprising message. Understanding the intent, however, can help clarify the issue above. Speaking of the qualifications for prophecy, the Gemara states (*Nedarim 38a*): *אֵין הַקֹּב"ה מְשַׁכְּנֵתוֹ אֶלָּא עַל גְּבוּרָה וְעֹשִׁיר וְחָכְמָה וְעֲנָיוּ* – “Hashem only rests His Presence on (someone who is) mighty, wealthy, sagacious and humble.” The latter two characteristics – wisdom and humility – seem to be appropriate prerequisites for high spiritual achievement. But how are we to understand that might and wealth are considered desirable and necessary for the attainment of prophetic vision?

To be sure, the Rambam (*Shemoneh Perakim*) understands that Chazal were not referring here to physical strength and material wealth; rather, the qualities under discussion are those that reflect true and inherent might and wealth, as described in the familiar Mishnah in Avos (4:1):

אֵינְהוּ גְבוּרַת הַכּוֹכָבִשׁ אֶת יָצְרוֹ ... אֵינְהוּ עֹשִׁיר הַשְּׂמִמָּה בְּהִלְקוֹ...

“Who is (truly) mighty? One who subdues his evil inclination... Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his lot...”

However, R’ Chaim Volozhiner provides a way of understanding the above teaching of Chazal even in the literal sense; that is, yes – the physical attributes of strength and monetary wealth are prerequisites for attaining prophecy! How could this be? R’ Chaim explains that, in truth, the primary quality that makes a person suited for this spiritual attainment is the trait of *anivus*, true humility. *And it is specifically for this reason that one must first attain success in the material realm before achieving prophecy.* How can it be determined that one is truly humble? A person in difficult and debilitating circumstances might simply be reacting in the most natural way to his situation. In other words, it may not be such a colossal accomplishment for a pauper to refrain from feelings of haughtiness. The real test is when a person is “on top of the world” (or at least what the superficial multitudes consider to be the epitome of success). When a person is blessed with tremendous wealth and abilities – and can nevertheless cultivate a sense of earnest humility – *that* is truly a “*kuntz*” (“trick”). And that is true humility. Indeed, it is when a person rises to a position of grandeur that he deserves credit for (honestly) considering himself a mere “*gornisht*.” Such a person, then, is ready to receive the Divine Spirit.

The Gemara that lists these qualifications for attaining prophecy derived them from the example of Moshe Rabbeinu. From where do we see that he was wealthy? The Gemara learns this from Hashem’s instruction to Moshe to carve the second tablets that would contain the Aseres Hadibros (Ten Commandments) – “*Pesal lecha* – You shall carve for you” (*Shemos 34:1*). This implies that he would be able to keep the remaining pieces of stone, which were extremely valuable (*cf. also Rashi, ibid.*).

Thus we see that Moshe Rabbeinu became wealthy *after* the episode of the breaking of the original tablets, well after the Revelation at Sinai. This explains why he “waited” until this week’s *parshah* (which occurred even later) to minimize the *alef*. The “Vayikra” term appeared initially in parshas Yisro, describing events that took place *before* the giving of the Torah – when Moshe had not yet become wealthy. As such, he hadn’t yet “earned the right” to “call himself a *gornisht*.” Only once he had attained wealth was a display of humility truly meaningful; and so it was here in parshas Vayikra that he first used the small *alef* (*Peninim Mishulchan Gavohah*).