

## Vayikra – Keriyah and Dibur: How Moshe Overcame His Aversion to Fire

It is hard to miss the double introduction to the Book of Vayikra:

**ספר ויקרא פרק א פסוק א**

**וַיִּקְרָא אֶלْ מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הִ אָלֹהִי מַאכְלָל מָועֵד לְאָמֵר:**

He **called** to Moshe, and Hashem **spoke** to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying:

Acknowledging the seemingly repetitious overture, Rashi explains:

**פִּירּוּשׁ רַשִׁׁי לְסֶפֶר וַיִּקְרָא פָּרָק א פָּסּוֹק א**

**וַיִּקְרָא אֶלْ מֹשֶׁה.** לְכָל דָּבָרֹת וְלְכָל אָמִירֹת וְלְכָל אֹוְיִם, קָזְמָה קָרְיאָה, לְשֹׁן חֲבָה, לְשֹׁן שְׁמַלְאָכִי הַשְׁרָת מִשְׁתְּמִישִׁין בָּו, שְׁנָאָמָר, "וַיִּקְרָא זֶה אֶלْ זֶה" (ישעיהו ז'), אָכָל לְנִבְיאִי אָמֹות בָּעוֹלָם, נְגַלָּה עַלְיָהוּ בְּלִשּׁוֹן עֲרָא טַמְאָה, שְׁנָאָמָר, "וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶל בְּלָעָם" (בְּמַדְבָּר כ"ג).

**He called to Moshe.** Before every act of speaking, saying, and commanding (from Hashem to Moshe), there came a “calling.” This is a term of love, a term which the Service Angels use, as it is said, “One (angel) calls to the other (angel).” But He (Hashem) reveals Himself to the non-Jewish prophets with a term of casualness and banality, as it is said, “G-d **chanced upon** Bil’am.”

The point is universal and understandable. As much as we all complain about workplace meetings, we can acknowledge that it is more dignified to be invited to a meeting which has a pre-published agenda than to have a question thrust upon us in the hallway. Hashem shows His love for Moshe by arranging a meeting with him, rather than just “bumping into” him, as it were.

The problem is that if the invocation of **וַיִּקְרָא** (with or without its accompanying **וַיֹּאמֶר**) were meant to teach us that Hashem treats Moshe with formality and respect, this lesson would not need to be taught more than once. It could either appear in every instance, or just once. Yet it appears exactly four times. This is an unusual number. Let’s examine these instances and see if an additional lesson emerges.

### Instance 1: The Burning Bush

**ספר שמות פרק ג פסוקים א-ד**

(א) וְמֹשֶׁה בָּיָה רָעָה אֶת צָאן יְתִרְוּ חֹתְמָנוּ כָּהֵן מִדְיָן וַיַּגְּבַע אֶת הַצָּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמְּדָבָר וַיַּבְאֶל הַר הָאָלָהִים חֲרֵבָה: (ב) וַיַּרְא מֶלֶךְ הָאָלֹהִים בְּלִבְתַּת אֲשֶׁר מִתְּזַהַב הַסְּפָנָה וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה הַסְּפָנָה בְּעֵר בָּאָשׁ וְהַסְּפָנָה אִינְבוֹ אֲכָל: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אָסְרָה נָא וְאַרְאָה אֶת הַמְּרָאָה הַגָּדְלָה הַזָּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא יַבְעֵר הַסְּפָנָה: (ד) וַיַּרְא הִ כִּי סַר לְרָאֹת

**וַיִּקְרָא אֶלְיוֹ אֶלְקִים מִתְּזַהַב הַסְּפָנָה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּנִי:**  
(1) Moshe was a shepherd of the sheep of his father-in-law Yitro, the priest of Midian. He led the sheep toward the desert, and he came to the mountain of G-d, to Chorev. (2) An angel of G-d appeared to him in an intense **fire** out of the bush. He saw, and behold, the

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bush was on **fire**, but the bush was not consumed! (3) Moshe said, “I will turn and see this marvelous sight; why doesn’t the bush burn up?!” (4) G-d saw that he had turned to look, and G-d **called** to him from within the bush, **and he said**: “Moshe! Moshe!” He answered, “Here I am!”

### Instance 2: Moshe Ascending Har Sinai

#### ספר שמות פרק יט פסוק ג, יח-כג

(ג) וְמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל פְּאַלְמָרִים וַיַּקְרָא אֲלֵיו ה' מִן הַכְּרָב לְאמֹר כִּי תֹאמֶר לְבִתִּי יַעֲקֹב וְתַגִּיד לְבָנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ... (יח) וְהִרְסִינִי עַשְׂנָן כָּלָי מִפְנֵי אֲשֶׁר יַרְדֶּנֶל עַליו ה' בְּאָשׁ וַיַּעֲלֵל עַשְׂנָנוּ כְּעַשְׂנָן הַכְּבָשָׂן וַיַּחֲרֵד כָּל הַכְּרָב מִאָד: (יט) וְיָהִי קֹל הַשְּׁפֵר הַזָּלוֹג וַיַּזְקֵק מָאֵד מֹשֶׁה יְדָבֵר וּפְאַלְקִים יַעֲנָה בְּקֹל: (כ) וַיַּרְדֶּנֶל ה' עַל הַר סִינְיָה אֶל רַאשׁ הַכְּרָב וַיַּעֲלֵל מֹשֶׁה: (כא) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה רֵד בָּעֵם פָּנֵי יְהִרְסֵן אֶל ה' לְרָאֹת וְנִפְלֵל מִמֶּנּוּ רַב:

(3) Moshe went up to G-d. G-d **called** to him from the mountain, saying, “This shall you say to the house of Ya’akov and describe to the children of Israel.” ... (18) Now Mt. Sinai was entirely smokey, for G-d had come down upon it in **fire**; the smoke rose like the smoke of an oven, and the whole mountain shook greatly. (19) The blare of the horn grew increasingly loud. Moshe spoke, and G-d answered him with a voice. (20) G-d came down upon Mt. Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and G-d **called** Moshe to the top of the mountain, and Moshe went up. (21) G-d **said** to Moshe, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to G-d to gaze, or many of them will fall.”

### Instance 3: The Ten Commandments

#### ספר שמות פרק כד פסוק טז-יז

(טז) וַיָּשֹׁן כְּבֹזֶד ה' עַל הַר סִינְיָה וַיַּכְפֹּהוּ הַעֲנָן שְׁשָׁת יְמִים וַיַּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה בַּיּוֹם הַשְׁבִּיעִי מִתְוֹךְ הַעֲנָן: (כ)

וּמְرָאָה

כְּבֹזֶד ה' בְּאָשׁ אָכַלְתָ בְּרַאשׁ הַכְּרָב לְעֵינֵי בָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (16) The glory of G-d resided on Har Sinai, and it was covered by the cloud for six days. On the seventh day He **called** to Moses from inside the cloud. (17) The glory of G-d appeared like a consuming **fire** from the top of the mountain in the eyes of all of the Jews.

### Instance 4: Korbanot (Offerings)

#### ספר ויקרא פרק א פסוק א, ז

(א) וַיַּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּدַבֵּר ה' אֲלֵיו מְאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְאמֹר: ... (ז) וַיִּתְנוּ בָנֵי אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהן אֲשׁ עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְעַרְכָּה עַצְּים עַל הַאֲשׁ:

(1) He **called** to Moshe, and Hashem **spoke** to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: ... (7) The sons of Aharon, the priest, will put **fire** on the altar and set up wood upon the **fire**.

#### פִּירּוֹשׁ רְשִׁיּוֹת לְסִפְרֵי וַיַּקְרָא פְּרָקָק א פָּסּוּק ז

וַיִּתְנוּ ... אֲשׁ. אָף עַל פִּי שֶׁהָאָשׁ יָרַדְתָ מִן הַשְׁמִימָם, מֵצָה לְהַבְיאָ מִן הַקְּדִים.

**They will put ... fire.** Even though the fire comes down from Heaven, it is a commandment that it be brought by a human.

There is a clear commonality between the cases in which Moshe is called to, or invited by, Hashem: They all involve fire. But what is the significance of this connecting thread?

There is a well-known Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 1:26) that as a baby, Moshe was tested to see whether he would reach for coal or a gold coin. By reaching for the coal (assisted by the angel Gavriel), his life was miraculously saved, but he was left with a speech impediment. This, according to the Midrash, is what is alluded to in Shemot 4:10: לא איש דברים א נ כי ... כי – “I am not a man of words ... for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech.” Rashi does not quote this famous Midrash on those words in the Chumash or anywhere else. If Rashi takes this Midrash not as Peshat (the simple meaning of the Pasuk), then Moshe did not have a lifetime fear of fire to get past. This may be why Rashi universalizes this lesson in his comment with which this essay began, because it had nothing to do with fire. But if we take this Midrash as Peshat, then we can understand why the specific instances in which Hashem invites Moshe into conversation are those very times which involve fire. Knowing that Moshe will find these instances particularly triggering and unnerving, Hashem prefaces them with a special and loving invocation, letting him know that he should not worry despite his lifelong aversion to fire.

One final point can be made regarding fire and Moshe. The first three plagues were all started by Aharon. (See Shemot 7:19-20, 8:1-2, and 8:12-13.) The fourth and fifth plagues were started by Hashem Himself. (See Shemot 8:20 and 9:6.) The sixth plague was started by Moshe and Aharon together. (See Shemot 9:8-10.) It was not until the seventh plague that we finally find a plague that Moshe started himself. And what is an outstanding characteristic of that plague?

### **ספר שמות פרק ט פסוק כג-כד**

(כג) וַיַּעֲשֵׂה מֹשֶׁה אֶת מְטֻהָהוּ עַל הַשְׁמִינִים וְה' נִתְןָ קָלָת וּבָרֶד וּמְהֻלָּה אֲשֶׁר וַיִּמְטֵר ה' בָּרֶד עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:  
(כד) וַיְהִי בָּרֶד וְאֲשֶׁר מִתְלַקְתָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּרֶד קָבֵד מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לְאַרְבָּה כָּמָה בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם מִזֶּה בִּתְהָה לְאֵלָי:  
(23) Moshe held out his staff over the sky, and G-d sent thunder and hail, and **fire** streamed down to the ground, as G-d rained down hail upon the land of Egypt. (24) The hail was very heavy – **fire** flashing inside the hail – the likes of which had not fallen on the land of Egypt for as long as it had been a nation.

The emphasis on the fire inside the hail is very intriguing and unexpected. Nowhere else among the plagues do we find such a counterintuitive description of a plague. There was no water among the blood; there were no lions among the frogs. The story of the plagues is not a tale of opposites coexisting, but of one material at a time menacing the populace. Perhaps the fire was intended to teach a lesson not to the Egyptians, but to Moshe. For the very first plague that he brought to the world by himself, he needed to reach outside of his comfort zone – **על השמים** – over the sky – and attempt to grow past the limitation that had been placed on him by his youthful trauma. Although we do not find the word **וַיִּקְרָא** here, it is implied by Hashem’s inviting Moshe to take a step in the direction of growing past his ingrown anxiety. Only then can he proceed as the leader of a people with a lifetime of trauma to grow past before they can begin to be a free nation.

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After the beginning of the Book of Vayikra, we never again find the term **וַיַּקְרֵא** used by Hashem to call to Moshe, but the motif of fire is ever-present in the Mishkan. In the fire of the offerings, Moshe has found his fears ameliorated. Whatever reservations he may have held about being around fire vanish as the daily Tamid and Ketoret (incense) service rise to the sky in the Mishkan.