

## 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 אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֵלָיו מֵאֵת הַתְּנוּךְ לֵאמֹר:

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

Acknowledging the seemingly repetitious overture, Rashi explains:

### פירוש רש"י לספר ויקרא פרק א פסוק א

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה. לְכָל דְּבָרוֹת וּלְכָל אֲמִירוֹת וּלְכָל צִוִּיִּים, קִדְמָה קְרִיאָה, לְשׁוֹן חֲבֵה, לְשׁוֹן שְׂמֵלֶכֶי הַשָּׂרֵת מִשְׁתַּמְשִׁין בּוֹ, שְׁנָאֵמֶר, "וַיִּקְרָא זֶה אֶל זֶה" (ישעיהו ו'), אֲבָל לְנִבְיָאֵי אֲמוֹת הָעוֹלָם, נִגְלָה עֲלֵיהֶן בְּלִשׁוֹן עֲרָאִי וְטָמֵא, שְׁנָאֵמֶר, "וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶל בְּלָעָם" (במדבר 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 וַיְדַבֵּר or 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) וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוֹ לִהְיוֹת מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג אֶת הַצֹּאן אַחֵר הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֲרִיבָה: (ב) וַיֵּרָא מֵלֶאכֶּה ה' אֵלָיו בְּלִבְתֹּ אֵשׁ מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה הַסֵּנֶה בֹּעֵר בָּאֵשׁ וְהַסֵּנֶה אֵינּוּ אֹכְלִי: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרָה נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת הַמֵּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא יִבְעַר הַסֵּנֶה: (ד) וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי סָר לְרֹאוֹת וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹקִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסֵּנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּבִי:

(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

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-כא

(ג) ומשה עלה אל האלהים ויקרא אליו ה' מן ההר לאמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל: ... (יח) והר סיני עשן כל מופני אשר ירד עליו ה' **באש** ויעל עשנו כעשן הכבשן ויחרד כל ההר מאד: (יט) ויהי קול השפך הולך וחרק מאד משה ידבר והאלקים יענו בקול: (כ) וירד ה' על הר סיני אל ראש ההר ויקרא ה' למשה אל ראש ההר ויעל משה: (כא) ויאמר ה' אל משה רד העד בעם פן יפרסו אל ה' לראות ונפל ממנו רב:

(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) וישכן כבוד ה' על הר סיני ויכסהו הענן ששת ימים ויקרא אל משה ביום השביעי מתוך הענן: (כ) ומראה כבוד ה' **כאש** אכלת בראש ההר לעיני בני ישראל:

(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) ויקרא אל משה וידבר ה' אליו מאהל מועד לאמר: ... (ז) ונתנו בני אהרן הכהן **אש** על המזבח וערכו עצים על **האש**:

(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**.

#### פירוש רש"י לספר ויקרא פרק א פסוק ז

ונתנו ... אש. אף על פי שהאש יורדת מן השמים, מצוה להביא מן ההדיוט.

**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: **לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אָנֹכִי ... כִּי** – “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) וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת מַטְהוֹ עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָיָה קוֹל וּבָרָד וַתִּהְיֶה אֶשׁ אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: (כד) וַיְהִי בָרָד וְאֵשׁ מִתְלַקַּחַת בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּרָד כָּבֵד מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא־הָיָה כָּמֹהוּ בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָז הָיְתָה לְגוֹי: (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 – **עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם**, 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 ingrained 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.

## Parsha Perspicacities: Parshat Vayikra

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After the beginning of the Book of Vayikra, we never again find the term אֱלֹהִים 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.