

Parashat Vayikra, 5774 (2014)

Dear Chavraya,

For words to be more than merely the shaping of sound, but means of connection one to another, they need to be both spoken from the heart and heard from within the heart. A great calling wells up in the world all around us, God calling as to the first human, *ayeka/where are you* (Gen. 3:9), and the yearning of so many hearts that call, seeking nearness to each other and to God. To hear the calling of another's heart, and of our own, we need to be present, to pause and listen from the same heart that would speak. To be fully present with another, to truly listen and truly speak, is to be the I and the Thou we are meant to be. In the teaching of Martin Buber, the most important element in understanding I-Thou, as my teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz would explain, is the hyphen. The hyphen both joins and individuates, allowing both to be one while yet remaining uniquely distinct.

So it is in relation to God as well, as Buber teaches, "That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you – in the fullness of God's eternity, you? How would people exist if God did not need them, and how would you exist? You need God in order to be, and God needs you – for that which is the meaning of your life..."

I am so grateful for the yearly cycle of Torah reading, the gift of cycling and recycling, returning each week in time to the same well to draw the living waters of new understanding. So in this year's reading of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayikra*, I find Martin Buber and the way of I-Thou. With *Parashat Vayikra* we begin the third book of the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra/the Book of Vayikra*. So much of the book concerns sacrifice, the making of offerings. It seems like such an unlikely source for teaching on human relationship and interaction, and yet it is precisely in the yearning expressed through sacrifice that we come to look more deeply. The primary word for offering is *korban*, of the same root as *karov/close, near*. It is that yearning welling up, people seeking nearness with God and with each other. It is no accident that in the midst of this same third book of Torah is the deeper way of fulfilling that yearning and seeking for nearness, *love your neighbor as yourself...*; love of other and of self, I-Thou.

The entire book of *Vayikra* is crystallized in its very first word, *Vayikra/and God called...*; *Vayikra el Moshe va'y'daber Ha'shem elav/and God called to Moshe and spoke to him...* God calls to Moshe before speaking to him, reaching out without words at first, without content, only to invite, allowing each to be present. Rashi explains that God's calling is to allow for pause, giving to Moshe a space within which to reflect, to discern. The rabbis say that the Torah teaches *derech*

eret/mentchlichkeit/decency, that a person should not speak to their friend without first calling out to them, as in first inviting them to talk (Yoma 4b).

In the way of our calling, we allow the other to be present in the way they are and need to be in that moment. It is taught in a very simple way, and that itself is part of the teaching. The last letter of *vayikra*, the letter *aleph*, is written ever so small, telling of Moses' distress. No longer able to enter the Tent of Appointed Meeting as before, he struggles, feeling diminished, of broken heart. The small, diminished *aleph*, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, tells of Moses feeling *bowed and broken within himself/shavur v'shefel b'kirbo*. As one of our number around the learning table at JP Licks suggested, perhaps the small *aleph* also indicates the nature of God's calling, in the way of a still, small voice, tender and gentle, inviting, encouraging Moses to engage, to be present.

As Buber taught the way of connection, of how and what it means to be fully present with each other and with God, so the yearning of heaven and earth, of God and people for each other, becomes a signature teaching of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Long before Buber and the Heschel of our time, it is found in the teaching of the Ohev Yisrael, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apta. In the eighteenth century, the Apta Rov taught, *for it is through calling that connection is formed...*, *in the way that a person speaks to their friend*. It is all contained in the first word, *vayikra*, the calling from which words can then flow, the calling that allows each to be present as an I and a Thou.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor