

Dear Chavraya,

There seems to be a certain etiquette today that offers a framework for phone calling, an etiquette that I have surely violated more often than not. It seems that the proper way is to send a text message first and ask if it is convenient to call. While often feeling unsure or even frustrated with it, with this year's reading of *Parashat Vayikra*, I realized that there is something deep in this etiquette, something, whether with intention or not is rooted in Torah.

The very first word of the *parsha* is *vayikra*, giving its name to this week's portion and so to the entire third book of the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra*. It is an unusual beginning, *vayikra el Moshe* and "he"/God called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Tent of Appointed Meeting saying.... Rashi explains that calling is meant to precede speaking, allowing a space in which Moses, or us, can gather thoughts, a pause allowed in which to prepare to hear and to respond, a gathering of oneself in order to be fully present. While it is precisely the calling that is meant to wait, if I understand the etiquette correctly, the text message is in fact the "calling" that allows for pause, that gives space to the one we wish to address. Deepening my appreciation for such etiquette, this is indeed regarded as the way of *derech erez*, of good manners, of decency, the way of a *mentch*.

Something deeper is raised with the first word of this *parsha*, however, of this book. The question is what does it mean to be called? A certain discomfort often sets in, within ourselves and in the faces of others, if we would speak of being called by God. As we seek to live lives of meaning, it is a question that we would do well to engage.

Concerns come quickly. People have done terrible things in God's name, thinking they were called or told to behave in a certain way. There is the danger of hubris, believing that I have been called, but perhaps not you. The Torah itself offers a challenge to hubris in the very way that the word *Vayikra* is written, a tiny aleph as its last letter, as it might be in English, *VAYIKRa*. That little aleph, or *a*, teaches of Moses' humility. Tradition teaches that God told Moses to write the word *Vayikra* and Moses didn't want to, feeling it made him seem too special, to be so addressed. Told again to write that word that indeed reflects a special relationship, Moses said okay, but I'm going to write the *aleph* small!

The danger of arrogance, of abuse, of violence rooted in God's word, in God's calling, is one of the greatest dangers in religious life, thinking that one has a relationship with God more special than that of anyone else, or of another faith. The test of whether one has really heard God's call is in the nature of what one understands the message to be. God's voice comes on the gentle breath that was breathed upon the water at the very beginning, the breath of life itself. Our response to what is heard in God's call reflects the truth of the message, whether we act in accord with the very first calling, the calling of a world into being.

As the first word of the portion and the book, the essential dynamic that flows from *Vayikra* is a yearning and a quest for wholeness. Much of the third book of the Torah is focused on the nature of offerings as raised up in the desert

sanctuary, the *Mishkan*. The word for offering is *korban*, from *karov*, meaning near or close. The one who brings the offering is the *makriv*, one who facilitates nearness, who brings people close to one another and to God. That becomes the test of whether or not we have indeed heard God calling, the degree to which God's word brings people closer together rather than pushing them apart.

As each of us seeks the way of our calling in life, so too, whatever it may be, if done with caring and intention, we facilitate greater closeness and wholeness. That each one has a unique task and purpose in life is the signature theme of the Slonimer Rebbe. Our very presence in this world is the proof that our teacher brings, for if we were not needed we would not have come into this world. The challenge implicit in the awareness of our own calling, of our own unique presence and purpose, is to know that the same is true of every other person encountered as we live the way of our being called.

As we seek to give each other the space in which to consider the content of their calling, whether inspired by a friend or by God, it is more than a matter of etiquette, but of affirmation. In pausing before speaking, calling to the other becomes a way of drawing the other near, of creating the closeness in which relationship can happen.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor