

Parshat Vayikra- 2018/5778

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary in NY, relates how he never heard his parents call each other by their first names. His father called his mother, Mutti, from the German word for Mother, and his mother called his father by the German word for treasure, "Schatzi". I can attest that I only learned of my first name when I was 5 years, when my mother introduced me to my first-grade teacher as "Irwin". Previous to that, I was "Hartzi" or "meine Hartzele", meaning "my heart".

The irony of using such names is that they are both generic- anyone can fit these names, and yet personally endearing. They immediately force two people into an interpersonal relationship.

This manner of addressing others in endearing terms has fallen by the wayside, especially in situations with strangers. I remember well when waitresses at the old Second Avenue Deli would approach you with, "what can I get for you Sweetheart?", as if we had known each other or had been going steady for years. Of course, I was not her sweetheart in any formal sense, but by her calling me that, I was immediately drawn into her sphere of endearment, a trusted place where I was convinced she would make sure to bring extra sour dill pickles if I needed. When my mother, to this day, calls me "meine hartzele", I know that it won't be long before some sort of food will be offered; I know that my mother is there to insure my sustenance, even from hundreds of miles away.

This is how the third of the Five Book of Moses starts, where it says that G-d "called to Moses and then spoke to him out of the *Ohel Mo'ed*", literally, the Tent of Meeting that was the mobile Tabernacle. What is curious in this simple combination of phrases, but what is so unusual, is that previous to this reference, the Torah simply says,

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. An G-d spoke to Moses saying:

Here, the Torah says, וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו; וַיִּקְרָא, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה; And G-d called to Moses and then spoke to him. This is curious for two reasons: first, the other uses of the word וַיִּקְרָא, "to call", in the Torah refer to when someone or something is being called by a name, such as in Genesis,

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַבֹּשֶׁה אָרֶץ. And G-d called the dry land Earth...

There are only two other major occasions in which the Torah uses the word אֵיךָ to call out to someone, as it does in our Parsha. The first is when G-d calls out to Adam in the Garden of Eden, after he and Eve have eaten fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. G-d asks Adam, אַיֶּכָּה, “where are you?” Of course, G-d does not need to figure out where Adam is- He’s an all knowing G-d. But what He really was asking was “how are you doing?” This was because G-d knew that by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam’s life was forever transformed- he was now mortal; he understood *mitzvah* from sin, right from wrong; he understood birth and death. After this jolt, G-d wanted to know if Adam was OK. But nowhere does G-d call Adam by his name, He only speaks to Adam as “the man” and to Eve as “the woman”- the most generic terms possible. There’s no Schatzi or Hartzele. There’s no personal, endearing relationship, only G-d telling these two prototypic humans what is OK to eat and what is not. No wonder that right after the Torah tells us how G-d admonishes them for eating the forbidden fruit, the first thing Adam does is to name his wife, Eve, חַוָּה, because she was “the mother of all life”, as if to say, I cannot get along in life without a term of endearment for my loved ones.

The second occasion where the Torah refers to G-d calling out someone using the word אֵיךָ is when Moses is shepherding his flock in the desert, ascending Mount Horeb, he comes upon a bush engulfed in flames yet it is not consumed. G-d calls out to him from the burning bush, and says, “Moses, Moses”, and Moses answers הִנְנִי, “here I am”. To me, this incident shows that G-d has a learning curve. Where He failed to establish an endearing relationship with Adam, here He endears Moses by first knowing his name and second by saying it twice, as if to say, “I know you, I know where you are in your journey.” He might as well have called him Schatzi.

By the time we get to this third book of the Torah, starting with this week’s parsha of Vayikra, it is obvious that G-d has matured even more in his role as a parent to the children of Israel. In the Torah scroll, the word אֵיךָ is written with a small *alef*. This contrasts with the first letter of the opening word in the Book of Chronicles, דְּבַר-הַיָּמִים in which the *alef* in Adam is written in oversized script. The latter, large *alef* is thought to signify that Adam was formed by G-d directly, in G-d’s image. Because of this, Adam was somewhat prideful, and that is why he disobeyed G-d and ate forbidden fruit. In contrast, Moses’ journey was one from pride- when he grew up in the court of Pharaoh, to humility, when he realized under Jethro’s tutelage

that his gifts were bestowed upon him by G-d. Thus, it is said that when Moses transcribed the Torah, he wrote the word וַיְקַרְא with a small alef out of humility. This is because when G-d calls out Moses to teach him about the rules of the sacrifices in the Tabernacle, He is doing this as a loving, endearing parent.

The lesson of the *alef* is this: teach your children of their greatness, their talents, special abilities and amazing potentials. Yet make sure to teach them that these come from G-d, and that without a sense of humility and endearment to others, their vanity will only get them banished from the Edens in their lives.