

PARSHAS VAYIKRA – MR KEITH GOLDSTEIN

THE HUMILITY OF MOSHE RABEINU

At the beginning of Sefer Vayikra it says that Hashem called to Moshe. The word "Vayikra" is written with a small letter aleph. The Baal Haturim comments that Moshe wanted to write the word as "vayikar" without the aleph, suggesting a chance encounter, as is written of the Divine appearance to Bilaam but Hashem insisted that he write it with an aleph and Moshe wrote it with a small aleph, which demonstrates his humility.

Rav Noson Gestetner (RNG) z"l in his sefer "Lehoros Noson" asks how writing a small aleph symbolises the humility of Moshe Rabeinu and - particularly in the light of Rashi's comment that this manner of calling, an expression of love used by the Angels, is a precedent for all commands to Moshe from Hashem - asks further why is it particularly used here, in the prelude to the commandments of the Korbonos.

RNG answers the first question by bringing a direct co-relationship between the greatness of a person and his humility. He quotes the Avos de Rav Noson comment on the verse stating that 'Moshe was extremely humble, more than any other man on the face of the earth', that there are three levels of 'persons with scabs' and Moshe's spirit was lower than all of them. RNG explains this comment by quoting the Midrash Rabah which says that it is the nature of a person that he looks down upon a person of lower status. The rich man looks down on the poor man, the poor man looks down on the destitute man and the destitute man looks down on the person afflicted with scabs. The person afflicted with scabs of the least severe level looks down on the person afflicted with scabs on a more severe level who, in turn, looks down on the person afflicted with scabs on the most severe level. RNG enquires what of the last mentioned person, who, seemingly, is right at the bottom of the heap and has no one to look down upon?

He answers that such a person still prides himself on the fact that he is alive rather than not existing at all. Accordingly, when it says that Moshe's spirit was lower than that of the person with the most severe form of scabs it meant that from Moshe's perception it was as if he, Moshe, did not exist at all – witness the verse in which Moshe says of himself and Aharon "what are we?" The Gemara comments on that verse that what is said about Moshe and Aharon is greater than what was said of Avrohom who described himself as dust and ashes; (as the Vilna Gaon explains dust is something which has no past use but which can be moulded for use in construction to have a future whereas ashes have a past as they were something of value but cannot be put to future use) Avrohom said that he was someone with no past and no future – Moshe considered himself and Aharon not even to have a present!

We see from that Gemara that a person's greatness can be assessed by the extent of his humility. RNG quotes a number of sources for this in Tanach and in the words of Chazal and in the Rambam. Perhaps the most striking is that of Hillel in the Midrash Rabah in which he says that his humility is his elevation and that his elevation is his humility which is to say that a measure of a person's greatness is directly measured by his humility. Accordingly, it is fitting that Moshe, who had the greatest knowledge and appreciation of Hashem that a person can have, should be the most humble.

RNG goes on to explain the symbolism of a small aleph. He quotes from the Gemara and from Kabbalistic sources that the world was created with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, starting with the letter aleph, and accordingly something less than aleph (i.e. its diminution) symbolises non-existence which was Moshe's perception of himself. With this one can understand why the prophecy of Moshe Rabeinu was different from that of all other prophets in that he could consult with Hashem at will and the prophecies which he spoke were in plain language – as the Rabbis say the Shechinah spoke from his throat. The reason for these distinctions was that Moshe did not really have an existence separate from Hashem; his was the ultimate deveikus, whereas other prophets had to prepare themselves for prophecy and the prophecy which they uttered was in a form moulded to their individual character and style.

RNG goes on to say that the reason why Moshe's humility, a symbol of his greatness, is written in particular here is because this point was the pinnacle of Moshe's achievements. He quotes from the Midrash Tanchuma which says that the commandment to Moshe to teach the laws of sacrifice was greater than all that he had done before in bringing the people out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and bringing down the manna. RNG explains that all of the aforementioned things were possible because Hashem elevated Moshe above nature in which case all of the above-mentioned items came easy; Pharaoh had lost his power of choice and the others were inanimate. However, in the case of the sacrifices and commandments, the people whom Moshe was to educate retained the power of free will and hence Moshe had to procure that they make the right choice from their own volition, which is the highest level.

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