

The Secret of Good Communication

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Parshat Vayikra

Calling out to Moses, the Eternal spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.
(Leviticus 1:1)

Everything in the Torah is of significance. (Some matters require more work on our part to discern their significance, of course, but that has more to do with us than with the Torah.) Even the sequence of the events is important, and so we ask why it is that G*d [first] called out to Moses and [only then] spoke to him. Certainly, this is the natural order of things; it would seem passing strange for G*d first to speak to Moses and only then to call out to him. But even the otherwise ordinary, when it is told in the Torah, carries meaning.

Thus, the Babylonian Talmud (*Yoma 4b*) asks, ignoring the “ordinariness” of the sequence, why the text puts the calling before the speaking. “The Torah,” the Talmud responds, “teaches us good manners.” (Are you listening, Miss Manners?) “One person should say nothing to another without first calling out to the other.”

Not only is this good manners, of course; it is equally good and effective communication. By calling out a greeting, we signal the other that we are present, we recognize the other (by name), and we assure (as best we can) that the other is aware of us and ready to hear what we have to say.

“All living,” says our master and teacher Martin Buber, “is meeting.” And centuries earlier, the German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) declared, “*Dasein ist mitsein*; being-there is being-with.” By calling out, we acknowledge the meeting, the “being-with.” And we initiate (or, at least, propose) a Buberian *I-Thou* relationship, recognizing the personhood of the other. We acknowledge, by calling out before speaking out, that the other may be in a different place, a different consciousness, a different awareness from ours, and we ask the other (ask, not

demand) to hear what we have to say. And truly calling out means that, as G*d did with Ishmael (Genesis 21:17), we are prepared also to hear the other where the other is, even if that means postponing the (absolutely vital) thing which we want to say.

My father worked in hotel management most of his life. When sitting in the restaurant of a hotel which he managed, he would always position himself facing the door. Not, as with gunfighters on the American frontier, to avoid an ambush, but rather so that he would see others as they came in and, as the manager of the hotel, be able to greet them first! He taught me well; I, too, try to sit facing the door, and my eyes flick to the door whenever anyone enters the room.

As we read Leviticus 1:1, then, we observe that even G*d needs good communication skills! Even G*d needed to ask for Moses' attention first, to make sure that Moses was ready to listen, before trying to tell him something. And if it's good enough for the Creator of the Universe, it's good enough for us.

Do we remember to "call out" before trying to connect with the other? Do we try to pay attention when others "call out" to us? Even if the "calling out" is not verbal? Or not explicit?

*The tale is told of a man who came to his rabbi a few days before Passover to ask whether the obligation of the "Four Cups" (traditionally of wine or grape juice) which Religious Law requires that we drink at the Seder could be fulfilled with milk. The rabbi responded according to the Law (I do not recall the Halachic response) and then, when the man had left, sent his son, with a substantial amount of money, to buy all the provisions his questioner would need for the Seder. When the rabbi's son asked why, the rabbi replied, "If he is asking whether the obligation of the Four Cups can be fulfilled with milk, then he clearly lacks the wherewithal to buy meat for his Seder [for meat and milk may not be consumed together], and G*d knows what else he may need, besides."*

If we learn to call out and to listen, who knows what we might finally manage to say to one another, and what unspoken questions we might hear!

Shabbat Shalom.