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Vayikra

## *Chance or Providence?*<sup>1</sup>

A fundamental question, that has no doubt occurred to many of us here today, is: What is it that makes one person religious and another irreligious? True, there are obvious differences in practice: The religious person observes a special regimen of life, one directed by *mitzvot*, whether ritual or social or ethical, while the irreligious person does not observe this pattern of life. There are differences in commitments: The religious individual has faith and belief in one God, while the irreligious individual does not. But is there something beyond the formality of practice and the abstraction of faith, something more crucial to the basic outlook upon life that differentiates the believer from the non-believer?

I believe that this is the question the Rabbis proposed to answer in the incisive comments they gave us upon the first words of this morning's *sidra*, a word which also serves as the Hebrew title of the entire third book of Moses: *Vaykira*. In analyzing this one word, the Rabbis found looming before them two great historical figures, each pitted

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1. April 2, 1960.

irrevocably against the other, two antonyms as it were. In the word “*vayikra*” itself they saw, of course, the figure of Moses. Our verse (Leviticus 1:1) reads: “*Vayikra el Moshe,*” “And He [God] called to Moses.” If you eliminate the last letter of the word “*vayikra,*” you remain with the Hebrew word “*vayikar,*” “And He met, chanced upon, happened upon.” The second word raises the image of the pagan prophet Balaam, for about him is it written later in the Bible (Numbers 23:4), “*vayikar Elokim el Bilam,*” “And God was met by Balaam.” So the difference occasioned by this one letter shows the difference of two attitudes to God, one by Moses and one by Balaam. Moses hears the “call” of God; Balaam just happens to meet Him casually.

Our Rabbis (Leviticus Rabba 1:13) sharpened this difference and explained it thus: Concerning the “call” to Moses, “*vayikra*” is meant to connote “*leshon hiba, leshon zeiruz, leshon shemalakhei hasharet mishtamshim bo,*” “the language of love, of inspiration or activation, the language used by the ministering angels”; whereas concerning the attitude of Balaam, “*vayikar*” – the casual meeting with God – connotes “*leshon arai, leshon genai, leshon tuma,*” “the language of casualness and temporariness, the language of shame and disgrace, the language of uncleanness.”

This then is what our Rabbis meant in answer to the question we raised. One of the fundamental differences between the religious and the irreligious personalities, one of the major factors that makes one person devout and another skeptical, is the approach and the attitude to the significant events of life. If you look upon these major events of your life as mere chance, just luck or happenstance, as “*vayikar,*” an either lucky or unlucky accident – then that is the mark of an essentially irreligious person, that is the mark of *tuma*: unclean, irreligious. But if you look upon the events of life as being ordered occurrences, decreed by the supreme intelligence of God, and under His conscious direction, as providence rather than as chance – then that is the indication of a religious personality, that is the spiritual language of a religious person, the language of *malakhei hasharet*, ministering angels. So whether we see life as chance or as providence, as “*vayikar*” or “*vayikra,*” depends upon and also determines whether we are religious in outlook or not, whether we speak the language of *malakhei hasharet* or *tuma*.

And Balaam and Moses are distinct archetypes. Balaam, the man of “*vayikar*” and *tuma*, encounters God, but acts as if he had merely stubbed his toe against an unseen rock, shakes himself off, and goes on his merry way – unchanged, uninspired, passive, with an attitude of *arai*. Moses, however, the man of “*vayikra*” and *malakhei hasharet*, undergoes the same experience as did Balaam – the meeting with God – but he conceives of it not as a mere accident, but as a call, as a challenge flung to him from the heavens, as a summons to action, as an opportunity for *zeiruz* and *hiba*.

A Balaam-type personality would have celebrated Passover as merely a Jewish July 4<sup>th</sup>. He would have called it *Hag Yetziat Mitzrayim* – the Holiday of the Exodus – or *Hag HaHerut* – the Holiday of Freedom. He would have celebrated what he regarded essentially as a merely fortuitous configuration of natural, political, and diplomatic events. The whole of the Exodus he would have interpreted as a merely lucky accident and celebrated his good luck. A Moses, however, and the people of Moses, those who understand the language of *malakhei hasharet*, would have preferred to call this holiday by the name of *Hag HaPesah* and *Hag HaMatzot*. “Passover” means that God passed over the Jewish homes and struck only the Egyptians – this was not a matter of chance, but a deliberate, conscious act by God Himself. We refer to it as the Holiday of the *Matzot*, indicating that the Israelites put their faith in the prediction of Moses and the promise of God. The Exodus was not a matter of chance; it was divine providence. How we look, therefore, upon this greatest of all historical events in the life of our people is determined by an attitude of “*vayikra*” or an attitude of “*vayikar*.”

But in addition to this choice of “*vayikra*” or an attitude of “*vayikar*,” of chance or providence, proving to be the basic distinction between a religious outlook and an irreligious outlook, between an attitude of *tuma* or an attitude of *malakhei hasharet*, there are practical consequences in our own lives as well. Besides being a measure of religion or irreligion, the attitude to life as chance or as providence also will determine, ultimately, whether or not in the entire panorama of life we shall learn to take advantage of opportunities or let them slip by us. Our Rabbis meant for us to understand this when they referred to the distinction between these two attitudes as, on the one hand, the



language of *zeiruz* – inspiration or activization – or, on the other hand, the language of *arai*, casualness and impermanence. The man of “*vayikra*,” the Moses type, the one who views life as a revelation of providence, will be one who has the capacity for *zeiruz*: he will view all of life as a divinely given opportunity for self-development and service. He will view the great events of existence as a challenge to which he must respond, a call to which he must answer. All of life becomes an active inspiring series of opportunities which can be seized and developed. The person of “*vayikar*,” however, the Balaam type, he who views all of existence and all of life as merely chance and accident, for all of life will remain *arai* – just luck, bad or good, good fortune or misfortune, events never directed to him nor meant for him, and hence no necessity for answer or response. The great events of life will just slip by him – he will never view them as opportunities and therefore never take advantage of them. What to a Moses is a personal call is to a Balaam an impersonal, casual accident.

Moses sees the burning bush. Had he been a Balaam he would have regarded it as an improbable confluence of temperature, pressure, and oxygen, conditions resulting in the appearance of a flame without the bush being consumed. But he was Moses, and so he saw the revelation of providence. He therefore took the opportunity, seized it, and rose to this great destiny as the father of all prophets. In our *sidra* he hears the call of God – and gives Israel the opportunity to worship in its own way. Balaam, on the other hand, only chances upon God. He hears no call to which he feels compelled to respond. And so, from a meeting with God he ends up with a friendship with a Balak, the pagan king. He hears the voice of an angel – and ends up in a conversation with a mule.

Moses, who sees all of life as providence, sees two Jews fighting – and uses the opportunity to teach them the love of fellow man. He sees an Egyptian fighting with a Jew – for Moses this is the opportunity to put into practice his concept of social justice. He sees the shepherd persecuting the daughters of Jethro – this is a personal call, a challenge to take the opportunity to help the oppressed. That is how he becomes *Moshe Rabbenu* – teacher of Israel and the world.

With Balaam, the man who sees all of life as casual chance, it is completely different. The same opportunities are given to him – but he

does not recognize them as such. Balaam was, according to our Rabbis, a counselor in the court of Pharaoh. He could have done something about liberating the Hebrew slaves. He did not.

He was hired by Balak to curse the Jews. It was an opportunity for Balaam to straighten out his primitive companion. He did not.

Balaam had the ear of the ancient pagan world. He could have taught them something about real, true religion. He did not. That is why Balaam, the man of chance, never grows, never develops. He dies ignominiously – murdered and despised.

No wonder that the ancient Jewish custom is that a child who begins his or her study of the Torah begins not – as we do today – with Genesis, the chronological beginning, but rather with the third book, the book of *Vayikra*. It is as if the entire cumulative Jewish tradition told the youngster now beginning his or her study of Torah: At this time that you are beginning your career as a Jew, remember that there are two attitudes to life. The attitude you must take is that of “*vayikra*” – you must view all of life as a great call by God to you personally. You must accept everything in life as a direct challenge given to you by heaven, as a divine gift of opportunity for you to seize, to develop, to grow with, in order to contribute all that you have and you are to the betterment of Israel and mankind.

Finally, in addition to the distinction between chance and providence providing a clue to religiousness and whether or not a man will make use of opportunities, it provides us with a major distinction as to whether life is worth living, as to whether our existence is meaningful, as to whether human happiness is at all possible. This is what our Rabbis meant by making the further distinction between *hiva* (love, warmth) and *genai* (shame and disgrace).

For the man of “*vayikra*,” he who views life as providence, life does have the possibility of *hiva*. Even if life is sometimes painful, even if often it seems that most of it is a prolonged agony – still life can be lovely, it can be meaningful. I may not know why I am being subjected to pain, but if I recognize that God does know, that although I do not know its meaning at least God knows its meaning – as Job learned in his day – then that is a source of consolation for me. It means that my suffering is not devoid of meaning. Life still retains its inner worth. Life still is *hiva*.

If, however, my attitude is one of “*vayikar*,” that it is all a matter of chance, then all of life is *genai* – a horrible, cruel, meaningless joke. If that is my attitude to life, then even if mostly good and happy events happen to me, my existence can have no real, lasting value. Even if – as with Balaam – I should meet up with God Himself, still all of life can be an existence that is *genai*, meaningless and worthless. What for the man of “*vayikra*” is a meaningful emergence from darkness into light, an adventure in growth and development, is for the man of “*vayikar*” nothing of the sort. For him life is just a dimly lit hallway in which man stumbles meaninglessly, beginning from the great black void of prenatal obscurity and ending in the limitless abyss of emptiness and nothingness with which life comes to an end.

How interesting that so many modern people, who often attain riches and health and luxury, are yet profoundly miserable. For having lost contact with God, they view all of life only as chance and accident. For them life is *genai*, a shameful void. While at the same time, a deeply religious individual, even if he does not have this wealth and health and luxury, can attain happiness. For that person knows that life has meaning, and therefore, for that individual, it has *hiva*, love and warmth.

How great, then, is this distinction between our outlooks upon life. The difference between “*vayikra*” and “*vayikar*” is truly amazing. And as if to accentuate the magnitude of the seemingly little difference between attitudes, the Jewish tradition declared that the last letter of the word “*vayikra*,” the letter *alef*, be an *alef tzeira* – an *alef* written smaller than usual. There is only very little difference, the Jewish tradition meant to tell us, between “*vayikra*” and “*vayikar*.” And yet the consequences are almost infinite.

Indeed, these consequences must loom before us at every moment of our lives. The Harvard historian Oscar Handlin, in a book treating eight crucial events in American history, speaks of the zigzags of history as “a line made up of a succession of points, with every point a turning point.” Any moment in our lives and in our Jewish history is also a turning point. And it is only that little *alef*, that seemingly tiny distinction between “*vayikra*” and “*vayikar*,” which will make all the difference in the world. At this turning point in our lives, we can

either let life turn at will, subject to blind chance – “*vayikar*” – or accept it as a personal challenge and opportunity – “*vayikra*.”

If “*vayikar*,” then history is only a meaningless zigzag. If “*vayikra*” – it is a glorious upward curve in which man fashions his own destiny in a rising gesture to his Maker.

If “*vayikar*,” then man sits back like an outside spectator, sardonically smiling at the curious unfolding of events he is powerless to influence. But if “*vayikra*,” then he remembers what the Torah says at the end of the creation of the universe (Genesis 2:3): “*asher bara Elokim la’asot*,” “that God had created to make” – that to God, Creation is only a beginning which man must develop, make, and create further.

If “*vayikar*,” then the world is governed by cruel blindness of chance, and the Greeks were right when they referred to it as “Fortune.” But if “*vayikra*” – then Israel was right, and all of life and history is merely the manifestation of *yad Hashem*, the hand of God, about which we can rightly say “*beyadkha afkid ruhi*,” “in Your hand, we commend our spirit” (Psalms 31:6).

If “*vayikar*,” then Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, was right, and life is only “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” But if “*vayikra*,” then Rabbi Akiva was right, and “*haviv adam shenivra betzelem*,” “lovely and happy is man that he was created in the image of God” (*Avot* 3:14), and his life therefore is filled and pregnant with meaning and worthiness.

To all of us here, today and every day, God calls: “*vayikra*.” May we indeed learn to view life as the call of God. May we learn to accept and make use of the opportunities He gives. May we learn to accept life as meaningful and worthy, so that for all of us life may become “*leshon hiba, leshon zeiruz, leshon shemalakhei hasharet mishtamshim bo*.”