

Vayikra 2020: “Spring Break”

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch, 3/27/20

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom First, I’d like to acknowledge that this week’s sermon is sponsored by Rebekah and Sylvan Garfunkel, in honor of the birth of their son Asher Gabriel and in honor of his brit milah, which was held this week on Zoom. Mazal tov!

This week’s sermon is also sponsored by Deborah and Michael Schuman, in commemoration of the yahrtzeit of Deborah’s mother, Ethelyn bat Velvel z’l. May her memory be a blessing. We celebrated Purim just 2 weeks ago, but somehow it feels more like 2 months. A lot has transpired in the last few weeks, and if this continues much longer, we may feel as though we’ve lived in quarantine for years!

But I think we can find some comfort in the connection the Gemara in Mesechet Megillah 6b makes between Purim and Pesach. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says that in a leap year, we celebrate Purim not in the 1st Adar, but in the 2nd Adar, so that it falls closer to Pesach, as it does during regular years, to keep in mind the close connection between the redemptions which took place on both holidays.

One reflection of that connection is found in the book of Vayikra. Every regular year, Nisan and Pesach are introduced by Sefer Vayikra, as is Purim in a leap year.

We also find a connection to Purim in the first word of Sefer *Vayikra*. Strangely, the word *Vayikra* is written in a Torah scroll ending with a small letter *alef*. The Baal HaTurim explains that in an act of humility, Moshe initially wanted to write *Vayikar*, completely omitting the *alef*, which is the way God called Bilaam. But God refused to delete the letter *aleph*. As Rashi teaches, the word *vayikar* reflects the coldness God showed to the evil Bilaam (as in the Hebrew word *kar* or *cold*), in contrast to *Vayikra, and He called out* which suggests the warmth that God showed to Moshe. However, the Ba’al HaTurim explains that God commanded Moshe to keep the last letter *alef* small, to reflect the humility of Moshe’s request, because Moshe wanted to be humbly compared to the evil Bilaam. However, I find this explanation extremely disturbing. Why was Moshe’s request considered a sign of humility? He was the messenger of God, acting on behalf of the Jewish people, not on behalf of himself as an individual. Requesting that he be called with the term *Vayikar* was tantamount to asking the Jewish people to be referred to the same way as someone despicable!

The connection to Purim we referred to is found in the word *yikar*, a word which is used numerous times in the Megillah, and has the exact same root as *Vayikar*, God’s way of referring to Bilaam! In fact, the most important verse in the megillah, “layehudim hayita ora vsimcha vsasson *vikar*” ends with the same word, spelled *vayikar*!

Even more puzzling is the fact that when we read the word Vayikra in a Torah scroll, that small *aleph* makes it appear at first glance to be the word *vikar* instead!

Rashi goes on to explain how Moshe's prophecy reflects God's love to Moshe and the Jewish people in another way – through the breaks in the paragraphs in a Torah scroll. One type of break is the *Parsha Petucha*, an open paragraph, when an entire end of a line is left blank before continuing to the next paragraph. In contrast, a *Parsha Setuma* is a short break, and the next “mini” paragraph begins on the same line. I learned an extremely enlightening and novel way to understand the Chamisha Chumshei Torah, when one of my teachers taught us how to understand lessons in the context of the 2 kinds of breaks; the Parsha Petucha, the open paragraph, begins a brand new topic, whereas a Parsha Setuma is expressing an idea that is still part of the same topic of the previous paragraph.

In any event, Rashi explains that these breaks were God's way of giving Moshe an opportunity to contemplate each idea before going on to the next; a Parsha Petucha represents a long break of contemplation and a Parsha Setuma represents a shorter break.

This patient way of communicating with Moshe is a reflection of God's loving relationship with him, and as such, with us as well. And if Moshe needs breaks when he's receiving the Torah from God, we need them even more when we study Torah. In contrast, as I have pointed out in the past, there are no breaks whatsoever in the story about Bilaam in Parshat Balak, because as we explained, God's relationship with Bilaam was cold and void of any serious contemplation.

The Midrash points out that just as we are the students of Moshe, the people of the nation of Amalek are the students of Bilaam. So, it is possible that when Moshe asked to be called by the term *vayikar*, he was trying to express that God has two ways to help us defeat the students of Bilaam. God can express love for us openly, as in the story of Pesach and the war with Amalek shortly thereafter. But even when God hides Himself, and it feels cold and appears that things are going Bilaam's or Amalek's way, we can remember Purim and turn the coldness into *Vikar*, a word that means *dear or precious*.

In other words, Moshe was teaching us how God will help us defeat the evil ideology of Bilaam and his students, the nation of Amalek.

We're currently in the period between Purim and Pesach, and this year is turning out to be a particularly bleak time in our exile. However, we must remember that **both of** these holidays are linked by the message of the word Vayikra with the small *aleph*, marking commemorative events in which God's demonstrated His love. I think it is possible that we are being taught to search for positive, warm elements in our current hardships.

One of the most stressful aspects for many of us, including our entire Mekor community, is that we cannot engage in work or other social activities in the normal way. We are being forced, in other words, to take a “spring break”. God's love may be hidden now, as it was during the events of Purim, but we can remind ourselves that the Torah does teach about the value and meaning in breaks, including Shabbat and Yom Tov. And now that we've entered

the month of Nisan and we will soon observe Pesach, God willing, we will also celebrate our liberation from the bind we find ourselves in, and God will show His love openly, in a way that will let us rejoice once again. Shabbat Shalom.