



# Sermon Tidbits

MARCH 23, 2009

## Parashat Vayikra

### Answering the Call

#### Vayikra el Moshe vayidaber - "And [God] called to Moses and spoke..." (Leviticus 1:1)

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The Torah appears to be redundant in stating that after calling to Moses God spoke to him as well. The Talmud (Yoma 4a) derives an important lesson from this seemingly superfluous verbiage. "Scripture taught to us proper behavior (*derech eretz*), that a person should not say something to... [to someone]...unless he first calls to him." Thus, we learn a noteworthy lesson about communication. Before attempting to convey important information one should "call" and attract the audience's attention. However, the reverse is true as well. Once someone has made an attempt at dialogue, ignoring that advance sends a clear message of indifference and hostility.

Nowadays, the United States is enacting the Talmud's principle in its dealings with Iran. President Obama's recent message to the Islamic Republic mirrors the "calling" of the Talmud, while hoping to begin the process of dialogue about mutual concerns.

President Obama's epic overture to the Iranian people invoked "the common humanity that binds us," and offered Iran a "new day" in its relationship with the United States, The New York Times reported. However, the president warned Iran's leaders that their access to what he called Iran's "rightful place in the community of nations" would not be advanced by threats or by "terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions." President Obama urged Iran to discuss "in mutual respect" the issues that have led to the nation's international isolation, including Iran's nuclear program, global support for terrorism and anti-Israel rhetoric. Unfortunately, all previous overtures to Iran have been met by a long list of preconditions, including the removal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and a refusal to halt nuclear activity. In response to the president's message, Iranian Presidential Press Advisor Ali-Akbar Javanfekr stated once more that the U.S. should change its policies in practice before approaching Iran. To learn more about the Iranian threat, please visit [www.aipac.org/Iran](http://www.aipac.org/Iran).

While the United States hopes to begin constructive dialogue with Iran its message must be answered not with stall tactics, rhetoric or demands, but rather with meaningful and substantive dialogue. To date, Iran has yet to "answer the call," preferring instead to ignore American efforts to reduce tension and promote peaceful coexistence. ■

### Safely Lighting the World

#### Vayikra el Moshe - "And God called to Moses" (Leviticus 1:1)

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Ibn Ezra contrasts the first verse of Leviticus with the last section of Exodus. In Exodus, the Torah describes how Moses was literally unable to enter the Tabernacle because he was physically blocked by the *annan*, the cloud. (Exodus 40:35) Conversely, Leviticus begins with God specifically calling to Moses. Thus, even in times when Moses must have surely felt distant to the divine presence he continued to lead the people, and when the time was right God once again reached out to him. This episode can teach us a valuable lesson: while most of us will never receive a direct divine calling, and may even feel distanced from spiritual service, just as Moses continued to fulfill

his obligations we must continue with our responsibility as well – to be a sanctified people and a light unto the nations of the world.

The Jewish imperative to illuminate the world is one of the primary tenets of Judaism, and is now being enacted in its most literal sense by Israeli scientists. Using new technology they are working to ensure that all nations can enjoy the electricity that brings light, by means of nuclear power, while ensuring that the plutonium created therein cannot be used for nefarious purposes.

Engineers at Ben-Gurion University (BGU) of the Negev have developed a denaturing technique that could help combat the threat of nuclear proliferation, the website Israel21c reported. The method denatures the plutonium created in large nuclear reactors by adding Americium, a form of the basic synthetic element found in commercial smoke detectors and industrial gauges. Once denatured, the plutonium is unsuitable for use in armaments. “When you purchase a nuclear reactor from one of the five [major] countries [that produce nuclear reactors], it also provides the nuclear fuel for the reactor,” explains Professor Yigal Ronen, of BGU’s Department of Nuclear Engineering. “Thus, if the five agree to insert the additive into fuel for countries now developing nuclear power...they will have to use it for peaceful purposes rather than warfare.” The results of the research, to be published in an upcoming issue of the journal of Science and Global Security, has the potential to provide power to millions of people around the globe without the risk of dangerous materials falling into the hands of unstable governments.

Israel’s scientists continue to develop new and innovative ways to fulfill one of the central commandments of Judaism. In doing so, they are proving that Israel truly is “a light unto the nations.” ■

## Positive Coercion

### **Yakriv oto lirtzono - “He shall bring [the offering] according to his will” (Leviticus 1:3)**

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The Torah reminds us that a sin-offering brought in the Temple must be a voluntary contribution. However, what if a sinner does not want to bring an offering? The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 6a) explains that a sinner must be forced to bring his offering. “We coerce him. You might think that this is considered against his will...[however,]...We coerce him until he says ‘I want to.’” This Talmudic explanation seems contradictory. If we coerce him then how can his offering be willful? Maimonides (Laws of Divorce 2:20) resolves this conundrum by explaining that, “It is only considered coercion when we force a person to do something which he is not obligated to do. But, when his evil thoughts force him to...commit a sin and we coerce him to fulfill the commandment...this is not considered ‘coercion’ at all. Quite the opposite – he has overcome the evil thoughts forcing him to perform the evil deed.”

Maimonides comments teach us that one in a position of authority must use their power to convince someone to behave in an appropriate manner. In modern times, America has utilized Maimonides’ example through the exercise of its diplomatic muscle to help defend her friend and ally Israel.

While the United States recently pledged \$900 million in aid to the Palestinians, senior diplomats report that the U.S. will withdraw that pledge if a future Palestinian unity government between Fatah and Hamas does not recognize Israel's right to exist, the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz reported. In addition, American threats to boycott the upcoming “Durban II” conference on racism have prompted U.N. officials to alter the text of the draft resolution. While the amendments fail to remove affirmation of the first Durban resolution, which repeatedly singled out Israel for criticism, these changes clearly represent the effects of American action. By using its leadership position the United States is able to coerce other nations to carry out a more balanced and fair policy in their dealings with Israel. In taking this role the United States maintains a clear moral posture in support of democracy and freedom, which is the lynchpin of the special U.S.-Israel relationship. For more on the U.S.-Israel relationship, [click here](#).

In the world of international affairs countries often seek the path of least resistance. However, like the “coercion” of the Talmud, American efforts to change others views on Israel are simply the right thing to do. ■

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