



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

VAYIKRA • ויקרא

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** 7"צז

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel. "I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013). These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

Between Destiny and Chance

The third book of the Torah is known in English as Leviticus, a word deriving from Greek and Latin, meaning, "pertaining to the Levites". This reflects the fact that in Judaism the priests – all direct descendants of Aaron – were from the tribe of Levi, and that the ancient rabbinic name for the book was *Torat Kohanim*, "the law of the Priests". It is an appropriate title. Whereas *Shemot* and *Bamidbar* are shot through with narrative, the book between them is largely about sacrifices and the rituals associated, first with the Tabernacle and later with the Temple in Jerusalem. It is, as the name *Torat Kohanim* implies, about the priests and their function as guardians of the sacred.

By contrast, the traditional name *Vayikra*, "And He called", seems merely accidental. *Vayikra* just happens to be the first word of the book, and there is no connection between it and the subjects with which it deals. The truth, I will argue here, is otherwise. There is a deep connection between the word *Vayikra*

and the underlying message of the book as a whole.

To understand this, we must note that there is something unusual about the way the word appears in a *Sefer Torah* in this particular instance. Its last letter, an aleph, is written small – almost as if it barely existed. The standard-size letters spell out the word *vayikar*, meaning, "he encountered" or "he chanced upon." Unlike *vayikra*, which refers to a call, a summons, a meeting by request, *vayikar* suggests an accidental meeting, a mere happening.

With their sensitivity to nuance, the Sages noted the difference between the call to Moses with which the book begins, and God's appearance to the pagan prophet Bilaam, which does not use the same form of the word. This is how the Midrash puts it:

What is the difference between the prophets of Israel and the prophets of the pagan nations of the world? . . . R. Hama ben Hanina said: The Holy One blessed be

He reveals Himself to the pagan nations by an incomplete form of address, as it is said, “And the Lord appeared to Bilaam”, whereas to the prophets of Israel He appears in a complete form of address, as it is said, “And He called to Moses.”

Rashi is more explicit:

All [God’s] communications [to Moses], whether they use the words “speak” or “say” or “command” were preceded by a call [*keri’ah*] which is a term of endearment, used by the angels when they address one another, as it is said, “And one called to the other” [*vekara zeh el zeh*, Isaiah 6:3). However, to the prophets of the nations of the world, His appearance is described by an expression signifying a casual encounter and uncleanness, as it says, “And the Lord appeared to Bilaam.”

The Baal HaTurim goes one stage further, commenting on the small *aleph*:

Moses was both great and humble, and wanted only to write *Vayikar*, signifying “chance”, as if the Holy One blessed be He appeared to him only in a dream, as it says of Bilaam [*vayikar*, without an *aleph*] - suggesting that God appeared to him by mere chance. However, God told him to write the word with an *aleph*. Moses then said to Him, because of his extreme humility, that he would only write an *aleph* that was smaller than the other *alephs* in the Torah, and he did indeed write it small.

Something of great significance is being hinted at here, but before taking it further, let us turn to the end of the book. Just before the end, in the *sedra* of Bechukotai, there occurs one of the two most terrifying passages in the

Torah. It is known as the *tochachah* (the rebuke: the other appears in Devarim 28), and it details the terrible fate that will befall the Jewish people if it fails to keep its covenant with God:

As for the survivors, I will bring such insecurity into their hearts in their enemies’ lands that the sound of a windblown leaf will make them run as if they fled the sword; and they will fall, though no one is chasing them. They will stumble over one another as if fleeing the sword, when no one chases them. You will have no power to stand before your enemies. You will perish among the nations; your enemies’ lands will devour you.

Lev. 26:36-38

Yet despite the shocking nature of the forewarning, the passage ends with a note of consolation:

I will remember My covenant with Jacob; and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Avraham I will also remember, and I will remember the land . . . Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them nor despise them and annihilate them, will not break My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God.

Lev. 26:42-44

The keyword of the passage is the word *keri*. It appears exactly seven times in the *tochachah* - a sure sign of significance. Here are two of them by way of example:

If, despite all this, you still do not listen to Me – if still you walk contrary to Me – then I, in My fury, will walk contrary to you. I will punish you seven times more for your sins.

Lev. 26:27-28

What does the word *keri* mean? I have translated it here as “contrary”. There are other suggestions. The Targum reads it as “harden yourselves”, Rashbam as “refuse”, Ibn Ezra as “overconfident”, Saadia as “rebellious”.

However, Rambam gives it a completely different interpretation, and does so in a *halachic* context:

A positive scriptural command prescribes prayer and the sounding of the alarm with trumpets whenever trouble befalls the community. For when Scripture says, “Against the adversary that oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets” the meaning is: Cry out in prayer and sound an alarm . . . This is one of the paths to repentance, for when the community cries out in prayer and sounds an alarm when threatened by trouble, everyone realises that evil has come on them as a result of their own wrongdoing . . . and that repentance will cause the trouble to be removed.

If, however, the people do not cry out in prayer and do not sound an alarm but merely say that it is the way of the world for such a thing to happen to them, and that their trouble is a matter of pure chance, they have chosen a cruel path which will cause them to continue in their

wrongdoing, and thus bring additional troubles on them. For when Scripture says, “If you continue to be *keri* towards Me, then in My anger I will be *keri* towards you”, it means, “If, when I bring trouble upon you in order to cause you to repent, you say that the trouble is purely accidental, then I will add to your trouble the anger of being-left-to-chance”

Mishneh Torah, Taaniyot, 1:1-3.

Rambam understands *keri* to be related to the word *mikreh*, meaning “chance”. The curses, in his interpretation, are not Divine retribution as such. It will not be God who makes Israel suffer, rather it will be other human beings. What will happen is simply that God will withdraw His protection. Israel will have to face the world alone, without the sheltering presence of God. This, for Rambam, is simple, inescapable measure-for-measure (*middah kenegged middah*). If Israel believe in Divine Providence, they will be blessed by Divine Providence. If they see history as mere chance – what Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*, called “a trash bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind” – then indeed they will be left to chance. Being a small, vulnerable nation, chance will not be kind to them.

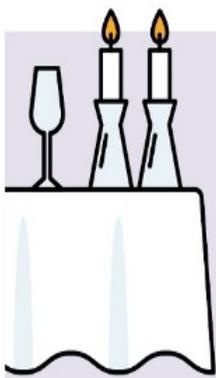
We are now in a position to understand the remarkable proposition linking the beginning of *Vayikra* to the end – and one of the most profound of all spiritual truths. The difference between *mikra* and *mikreh* – between history as God’s call and history as one event after another with no underlying purpose or meaning – is, in the Hebrew language, almost imperceptible. The words sound the same. The only difference is that the former has an

aleph while the latter does not (the significance of the *aleph* is obvious: the first letter of the alphabet, the first letter of the Ten Commandments, the “I” of God). The letter *aleph* is almost inaudible. Its appearance in a *Sefer Torah* at the beginning of *Vayikra* (the “small *aleph*”) is almost invisible. Do not expect – the Torah is intimating – that the presence of God in history will always be as clear and unambiguous as it was during the Exodus from Egypt and the division of the Red Sea. For much of the time it will depend on your own sensitivity. For those who look, it will be visible. For those who listen, it can be heard. But first you have to look and listen. If you choose not to see or hear, then *Vayikra* will become *vayikar*. The call will be inaudible. History will seem mere chance.

There is nothing incoherent about such an idea. Those who believe it will have much to justify it. Indeed, says God in the *tochachah*: if you believe that history is chance, then it will

become so. But in truth it is not so. The history of the Jewish people – as even non-Jews such as Pascal, Rousseau, and Tolstoy eloquently stated – testifies to the presence of God in their midst. Only thus could such a small, vulnerable, relatively powerless people survive, and still say today – after the Holocaust – *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives. And just as Jewish history is not mere chance, so it is no mere coincidence that the first word of the central book of the *Torah* is *Vayikra*, “And He called”.

To be a Jew is to believe that what happens to us as a people is God’s call to us – to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is humility essential for hearing God’s call?
2. Think of an event in your own life. Can you see it as both a random chance event and as a Divine call? What changes when you look at it from each perspective?
3. Rambam suggests that if we believe our lives are governed by chance, God will leave us to chance. Do you think our beliefs shape our reality in this way?

● These questions come from this week’s **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks’ *Covenant & Conversation*. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/vayikra/between-destiny-and-chance/>