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Vayikra

A-359

"CHANCE OR PROVIDENCE"

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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 man has faith and belief in one G-d, while the irreligious man 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: Va-yikra. In analyzing this one word, the rabbis found looming before them two great historical figures, each pitted irrevocably against the other, two antonyms as it were. In the word va-yikra itself they saw, of course, the figure of Moses. Our verse reads: va-yikra el Mosheh -- "And He (G-d) called to Moses." And if you eliminate the last letter of the word va-yikra, you remain with the Hebrew word va-yikar -- "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 va-yikar Elokim el Bilam -- "And G-d was met by Balaam." So the difference occasioned by this one letter shows the difference of two attitudes to G-d, one by Moses and one by Balaam. Moses hears the "call" of G-d; Balaam just happens to meet Him casually.

Our rabbis sharpened this difference and explained it thus. Concerning the "call" to Moses, they referred to va-yikra as leshon chibah, leshon zeruz, lashon she'malakhei ha-sharet mishtamshin bah -- the language of love, of

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inspiration or activization, the language used by the ministering angels. Whereas concerning the attitude of Balaam, va-yikar -- the casual meeting with G-d, they said that this word is leshon arai, leshon genai, leshon tum'ah -- a language of casualness and temporariness, a language of shame and disgrace, a language of uncleanliness.

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 a mere chance, just luck or happenstance, as va-yikar, an either lucky or unlucky accident -- then that is the mark of an essentially non-religious person, that is the mark of tum'ah: unclean, irreligious. But if you look upon the events of life as being ordered occurrences, decreed by the supreme intelligence of G-d, 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 ha-sharet, ministering angels. So whether we see life as chance or as providence, as va-yikra or va-yikar, depends upon and also determines whether we are religious in outlook or not, whether we speak the language of malakhei ha-sharet or tum'ah.

And Balaam and Moses are distinct archetypes. Balaam -- the man of va-yikar and tum'ah -- encounters G-d, but acts as if he had merely stubbed his toe against an unseen rock, shakes himself and goes on his merry way: unchanged, uninspired, passive, with an attitude of arai and genai. Moses, however, the man of va-yikra and malakhei ha-sharet, undergoes the same experience as did Balaam -- the meeting with G-d -- but he conceives of it not as a mere accident, but as a call, as a challenge flung to him from the

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heavens, as a summons to action, as an opportunity for zeruz and chibah.

A Balaam-type personality would have celebrated Passover as merely a Jewish July 4th. He would have called it Chag Yetziat Metzrayim -- the Holiday of the Exodus, or Chag ha-Cherut -- 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 ha-sharet, have preferred to call this holiday by the name of Chag ha-Pesach and Chag ha-Matzot. "Passover" means that G-d passed over the Jewish homes and struck only the Egyptians -- this was not a matter of chance, but a deliberate, conscious act by G-d 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 G-d. 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 va-yikra or an attitude of va-yikar.

But in addition to this choice of va-yikra or va-yikar, of chance or providence, proving to be the basic distinction between religious outlook and irreligious outlook, between an attitude of tum'ah or an attitude of malakhei ha-sharet, 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 that when they referred to the distinction between these two attitudes as, on the one hand, the language of zeruz -- inspiration or activization -- or, on the

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other hand, the language of arai, casualness and impermanence. The man of va-yikra, the Moses type, the one who views life as a revelation of providence, will be one who has the capacity for zeruz: 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 va-yikar, however, the Balaam type, he who views all of existence and all of life as merely chance and accident, for him 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 ~~is~~ 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 so that there was 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 his great destiny as the father of all prophets. In our Sidra he hears the call of G-d -- and gives Israel the opportunity to worship in its own way. Balaam, on the other hand, only chances upon G-d. He hears no call to which he feels constrained to respond. And so, from a meeting with G-d he ends with a friendship with a Balak, the pagan king. He hears the voice of an angel -- and ends up with 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

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Egyptian fighting with a Jew -- for him 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 Mosheh 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 counseller in the court of Pharoah. 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 him to straighten out the primitive king. 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 study of the Torah, begins not -- as we do today -- with Genesis, the chronological beginning, but rather with the Third Book, the Book of Va-Yikra. It is as if the entire cumulative Jewish tradition told the youngster now beginning his study of Torah: At this time that you are beginning on your career as a Jew, remember that there are two attitudes to life. The attitude you must take is that of va-yikra -- you must view all of life as a great call by G-d 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 upon, to develop, to grow with, in order to contribute all that you have and you are to the betterment of Israel and mankind.

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Finally, in addition to the distinction between chance and providence providing a clue to religiosity 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 as to chibah -- love, warmth -- and genai -- shame and disgrace.

For the man of va-yikra, he who views life as providence, life does have the possibility of chibah. 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 G-d does know, that although I do not know its meaning at least G-d 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 chibah.

If, however, my attitude is one of va-yikar, 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 G-d Himself, still all of life is genai, meaningless and worthless. What for the man of va-yikra is a meaningful emergence from darkness into light, an adventure in growth and development, is for the man of va-yikar 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.

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How interesting that so many modern men, who often attain riches and health and luxury, are yet profoundly miserable. For having lost contact with G-d, 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 he knows that life has meaning, and therefore, for him, it has chibah: love and warmth.

How great, then, is this distinction between our outlook upon life. The difference between va-yikra and va-yikar is truly amazing. And as if to accentuate the magnitude ~~of the differences and the~~ of the seemingly little difference ~~with which we begin an~~ between attitude, the Jewish tradition declared that the last letter of the word va-yikra, the letter alef, be an alef zeira -- an alef written smaller than usual. There is only very little difference, the Jewish tradition meant to tell us, between va-yikra and va-yikar. 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 "... it is a line made up of a succession of points, with every point a turning point!" This 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 va-yikra and va-yikar, which will make all the difference in the world. At this turning point of our lives, we can either let it turn at will, subject to blind chance -- va-yikar; or accept it as a personal challenge and opportunity -- va-yikra.

If va-yikar, then life and history is only a meaningless zigzag. If va-yikra -- it is a glorious upward curve in which man fashions his own destiny in a rising gesture to G-d.

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If va-yikar, then man sits back like an outside spectator, sardonically smiling at the curious unfolding of events he is powerless to influence. But if va-yikra, then he remembers what G-d said at the end of the Creation of the Universe: Asher bara Elokim la'asot -- "that G-d had created to make," that G-d creation is only a beginning which man must develop, and make, and create, further.

If va-yikar, then the world is governed by cruel blindness of chance, and the Greeks were right when they referred to it as Fortune. But if va-yikra -- then Israel was right, and all of life and history is merely the manifestation of Yad ha-Shem, the hand of G-d, about which we can rightly say be'yadkha afkid ruchi -- "in Thy hand, we commend our spirit."

If va-yikar, then Shakespeare was right, and life is only "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But if va-yikra, then Rabbi Akiba was right, and Chaviv adam she'nivra be'tzellem -- lovely and happy is man that he was created in the image of G-d, and that his life therefore is filled and pregnant with meaning and worthiness.

To all of us here, today and every day, G-d calls: va-yikra. May we indeed learn to view life as the call of G-d. 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 chibah, leshon zeruz, lashon she'malakhei ha-sharet mishtamshin bah.