

This week we begin reading Leviticus, that book of intricate rules and regulations, many of which lost their original relevance after the destruction of the second Temple in 70CE, but nonetheless have been continually discussed and adapted, and which also offer us valuable insight into the minds and world of our ancient ancestors. But it is precisely this book, in the middle of the Torah, that contains the essential lessons that not only connect us to the past, but also teach us how to live in the present and work toward creating a better future. The Hebrew name of this book is its opening word *vayikra* (and He [HaShem] called). Calling to Moses from the Tent of Meeting, HaShem gives him instructions for setting up the sacrificial system of the *mishkan*, the offerings through which our ancestors established a link between themselves and HaShem. It is noteworthy that in the very first verse of Leviticus we read three different words for communicating: “And He called (*vayikra*) to Moses, and the Lord spoke (*vaydaber*) to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying (*lemor*),” The choice of these words is intentional and deeply nuanced. Each verb indicates the relationship between speaker and addressee and the nature of the message being conveyed. The verb קרא (*kara*) means to summon, to call out to, to name. It is an invitation indicating closeness and affection that functions as HaShem’s prelude to communication. In other words, it establishes connection and invites the listener to be prepared and receptive. We might understand it as the moment when a teacher or parent makes eye contact to focus a child’s attention. Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 1 teaches that all Divine communications with the prophets of Israel were preceded by this call of endearment and respect, which the ministering angels also use to call to one another. In contrast, HaShem addresses “the nations of the world” only indirectly, through dreams and night visions. In a pithy comparison of how HaShem communicates with different people, the midrash says, “This is analogous to a king who had a wife and a concubine. When he would go to his wife, he would go in public, and when he would go to his concubine he would go clandestinely.” Viewed in this light, *vayikra* indicates identity. HaShem calls people by name, affirming their credentials before delivering the message. The midrash contrasts *vayikra* with *vayikar* (וַיִּקָּר), how HaShem “happened upon Bil’am (Numbers 23:4), which is used to explain the small aleph at the end of the word *vayikra*: וַיִּקָּרָא: “... because Moses wanted to write *vayikar*, as it is said of Bil’am, as if HaShem had only happened upon him accidentally. HaShem told him to write an aleph, which indicates His love, but Moses [in his great humility] made it small.” (Kitzur Ba’al HaTurim Leviticus 1:1) The word *vayedaber* (וַיְדַבֵּר) is more formal, precise, structured, and legalistic, implying clear boundaries and strict discipline. It is the language of commandments, obligations, and public revelation. In Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are called *Aseret HaDibrot* (Ten Words/Statements). It stems from the root דבר, which forms words such as thing, occurrence, belongings, words, speech, and also plague. In Jewish thought, this multitasking root implies that speech is capable of building as well as destroying. Words and plagues travel invisibly through the air. Slander (*lashon ha-ra*) is like a virus that can spread incrementally and do tremendous harm. As history has taught us time and again, and as we are seeing all too often today, social catastrophes and wars usually begin with a “verbal plague,” hateful, divisive speech that leads to tragic action. Words such as to lead/drive forward also derive from this root. For example, *midbar* is the wilderness where flocks and herds are driven, but also very often the place where HaShem’s word is received. Finally, the word *vayomer* (וַיֹּאמֶר) implies gentleness, quiet communication, explanation, storytelling, and persuasion. It often introduces promises, visions, blessings, dialogue, or narrative, and indicates possibility rather than obligation. It is significant that *vayomer* is used in the Creation narrative. HaShem does not command the world into existence, but rather, invites it to become. This suggests that the physical world is an exchange between Creator and creation, not a rigid place of absolutes. It also indicates boundaries: light and dark, water and land, distinct environments and species. And it also describes HaShem’s unceasing action. In Chassidic thought, creation is ongoing and the Divine words that first called it into being reside forever within every created thing. If the letters that formed the words of creation were withdrawn for even a moment, the world would return to nothingness. *Amar* (אָמַר) is the most neutral and flexible of the three verbs. It can even include negative implications, but unlike *dibur*, negativity occurs only through context, not from the verb itself. It is danger couched in possibilities, with subtle speech that soothes, persuades, and manipulates. It is how the serpent talks to Eve, and how Joseph’s brothers plot against him. Whereas *dibur* denotes the strict delineation of either-or, *amar* is conversational and open to possibilities. The essence of our covenant is a movement through these three verbs. It begins with a call (*kara*), establishing the foundation of identity. We are not subjects of a tyrant; we are partners who have been invited into a relationship. *Dibur* builds the framework of our covenant, with the commandments providing order and preventing the corruption of power. *Amar* ensures that we understand by creating dialogue meant to infuse our lives with holiness. For each of us personally, *kara* is our call to action, *dibur* is the ethical structure within which we may act, and *amar* is how we communicate with others and with our Creator.

Shabbat shalom!