



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

God's call

The Book of Leviticus is both a challenging and fascinating read. After all the action-packed stories of Genesis and Exodus, upon reaching Leviticus the reader notices the lack of movement. The entire book is set at the foot of Mt Sinai. There in the wilderness, God calls and speaks, forming the people by unveiling a series of instructions: how to worship, how to behave, how to deal with transgression. Through a system of order and repeated ritual, the identity of Israel, as God's holy, chosen people, is solidified. As we read these texts it helps to be reminded of the ever-searching human heart desiring to express its encounter with divine mystery, in ancient times as much as today.

Jewish tradition can help us considerably in finding a lively connection with Leviticus, having gathered volumes of insightful and creative commentary over the centuries. Traditional Jewish methods are painstakingly attentive to the tiny details of expression, and employ imaginative storytelling (*midrash*) to enlarge the meaning of the text. Let's take an example from the opening verses of Leviticus:

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them... (Lev. 1:1-2).

The two verbs in verse 1 were of particular interest to the rabbinic mind. Why does the text say that the Lord called *and* spoke to Moses? Are both verbs really necessary? What deeper meaning can we find here in the apparent redundancy?

By the tone with which someone calls your name you can usually predict the sentiments of the message to follow! Likewise, the rabbis interpret 'call' as a relational indicator preceding the message itself. God addresses Moses as an intimate, *'like one whose hand is affectionately laid upon his son,'*¹ as one with whom there is an existing relationship forged through shared purpose and activity. The call comes not as a thunderous voice for all to hear, but from the Tent of Meeting (Tabernacle), i.e., from close by, from a site of great significance for both Moses and God.

But how does this thought relate to the chapters of ritual material that follow? Let the rabbinic voices reply in the language of story...

Scripture describes three 'calls' to Moses: at the burning bush, at Mt Sinai, and now as he is about to be presented with Israel's ritual code. But Moses repeatedly resisted God's call. At the burning bush he had to be convinced to go and confront Pharaoh. Having completed this task, he tried to stepped down from his public role, but God called him again, this time to lead the people out

of Egypt, across the Red Sea, to be fed by manna and quail, to receive the Law at Mt Sinai, and to build the Tabernacle. Moses did all this, but then felt he had done enough and again tried to retire from leadership. At this God said, *I have one more great task for you: teach my people to live as a holy nation.* Thus did God call Moses, to give him a code of holiness, the scriptures which we Christians refer to as Leviticus, and which the Jewish people know by its Hebrew name *Vayikra*, 'he called'.

The midrashic picture of Moses as a reluctant prophet-leader, gradually finding himself more and more enmeshed in God's service, speaks volumes to the life of faith. How many of us have offered a tentative 'yes' to an invitation to become involved in a parish community or in a work of the church, only to look back years later and see how it was the gateway to so much more; perhaps a lifetime of discipleship! From here, there are so many thoughts we could share from our experience of 'God's call', its blessings and its difficulties.

And all this from a single verse of scripture, interpreted with prayerful creativity via a time-honored Jewish storytelling tradition. •

1. Leviticus Rabbah, 1, 15

Sources: Friedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY: Avi, 2007).
Scripture: NJPS