

**Parashat Vayikra
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post Germany

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Beth Chayim Chadashim**

People often ask me how I decided to become a rabbi. But I've noticed through the years that there is a significant difference in the wording of this question, depending on a person's religion. Serious Christians will sometimes say something like, "when were you called?" They are interested in the details of when God called me, and how I knew I was being called. Those questions always makes me squirm. Jews seldom talk in such language - we're mostly not comfortable thinking God calls us to anything. It makes us nervous - maybe we think that if God calls us to serve, say, as a rabbi, then what are we to do with the person who says they were called, for example, to kill in God's name? It gets complicated quickly.

It's interesting to me - it's not as though the Torah shies away from God calling. In fact, the entire book of Torah we begin this week - Leviticus - is called in Hebrew, Vayikra, "and He called," (the "He" in this case is God) - Vayikra el Moshe "And God called to Moses" It is worth thinking about - how many of us feel "called" to do what we do in the world? Many of you know that 18 folks from BCC are just back from 11 days in Germany. The visit was extraordinary and in the weeks and months to come we hope to tell you much about it, as we slowly incorporate what we experienced and feel now into what we thought we knew and felt about Germany before our trip.

While the sights of Germany are fascinating, they would not shine quite the way they do for me now without the people we met who illuminated them for us. The people who guide us are among the great treasures of the "Bridge of Understanding" program we took part in.

They are, almost to a person, reflections of the paradoxes and complications of modern Germany. I was struck time and again by how well they serve in their capacities - from Esther, our 1/2 Jewish, world traveling, multilingual tour guide, who is writing a dissertation on Josephus; to Christian, the gay man who led us on our first days through gay and Jewish Frankfurt; to Daniel - the Educational Director at Buchenwald concentration camp; to Wendy, the Los Angeles Jew married to a German man who took us on a walking/bus tour of Berlin; to Jens, who is the child of Nazis (he told us how his mother wept when she heard that Hitler was dead) and is himself the Program Coordinator at the Study Center of the former concentration Camp Hamburg-Neuengamme, where, as a gay man, he specializes in what happened to gays in the camps. And these are only a few of our guides.

Let me tell you a little more about a couple of these extraordinary people. Actually Wendy will be joining us for services here at BCC next Friday night (she's coming with her family to LA for Passover!). Though Jewish, Wendy actually uses the word "called," to speak about her work. You can ask her yourself next Friday night. She grew up here in our city -

our friend Don Goor was one of her rabbis when she was growing up. She considered becoming a rabbi herself, and now she spends much of her life connecting people from all over the world to Berlin.

I was scared - mostly of the past - when we arrived in Berlin. I could see how Buchenwald serves as a memorial, but does anyone remember the war here, I wondered, in this bustling modern city? I needn't have been worried. A short time later we stood with Wendy in the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin, where an elderly Jewish couple looked at us - they seemed a bit puzzled. I heard one of them say - you are all Jews? Allison tells me she said, yes, we are serious American Jews visiting Germany. Wendy told them a little more in German. I'm not sure what she said, but they moved closer to us, smiling, and when we left, they said shalom, have a safe trip, a good visit. They were still blinking a lot, though.

Wendy met us at services the next night. I saw her speaking to the man who turned out to be the officer of the evening. Though his announcements were in German, somewhere in the middle of them we heard the words, Beth Chayim Chadashim, and saw a big smile coming our way. They didn't used to be so warm and welcoming, Wendy told me, they were more guarded, I guess. I suspect she has something to do with their new approach to visitors.

Vayikra - and God called.

Daniel, our German guide at Buchenwald, was a pacifist as a teenager. He is not Jewish. In the 1970s he was a conscientious objector in Germany, where young men were still drafted into the armed forces, and spent some time volunteering in Israel. His friends told him he must meet some Palestinians if he wanted to understand the conflict. He went on a bus with other peace workers, including his brother, to meet Palestinians, and on their way home the bus was bombed. His brother was killed; Daniel nearly lost his eyesight permanently (an Israeli doctor was able to save only one of his eyes after many surgeries). "I see the world very differently from most people," he said. "Are you still a pacifist?" I asked him. Had I taken the tour of Buchenwald with him before I asked that question, I might have been able to answer for him, for by the end of the tour it was easy to see that he is. How Daniel ended up as the Education Director at Buchenwald, putting him into contact with thousands of people yearly from survivors to German schoolchildren to Jews from all over the world to Christians and other non-Jews living or visiting Germany is a much longer story. I don't know it all. I know only that he is a wonderful person to be in that position, for as much as the camp and its exhibits and memorials speak for themselves, the connections Daniel makes tell a bigger story, and move the world toward a more peaceful future.

Vayikra - and God called.

Vayikra - and God called. Some think it is a typo, a scribal error, that the word is really vayikar - meaning, and God appeared to Moses. They say this because the last letter of vayikra, the aleph, is traditionally written smaller than the other letters. Vayikar might mean it was a more incidental - accidental - approach on God's part, some say, as though God appears on some street corner without giving any thought to which one, and it happens to be you standing there at that corner. Maybe.

I like that both words - vayikar and vayikra - are in that one word - God appears, and God calls. God appears to Moses, as indeed God might incidentally appear to any of us, but we like to take special note of the folks who wait until God speaks, who wait until God calls to them in particular, before proceeding. what is it with those who wait for God to call? why do they wait? humility? shyness? politeness? doubt? fear? perhaps they just hope that if they stand there quietly enough God will go away. But God doesn't go away (at least not from the people whose stories get told); instead, God calls.

In this first Torah portion of Leviticus, also called vayikra, we read of the sacrifices the priests are to make on behalf of the people. All kinds of sacrifices for all sorts of purposes. The word for sacrifice in Hebrew is korban - and it comes from the root meaning "to draw near." One sacrifices in order to draw near to God; or perhaps God draws near to the ones who sacrifice.

It's no easy task, no easy life, to be the ones who guide the others. Who give up previous lives, or take paths no one ever took before just because somehow God calls you to draw near. It's not a bad life - being called, making sacrifices - it's just often not an easy life, not for the called, not for their families. Ask Wendy, ask Daniel, ask Moses.

There is another explanation of the little aleph at the end of the word vayikra, at the end of God's calling. This explanation says that God does not call us in a booming voice, to wake us up, or to frighten us into obedience, but rather that the silent letter, aleph, the tiny letter aleph there at the end of vayikra makes God's call into a whisper. vayikra - God appears at your shoulder and whispers into your ear.

All over Germany I could hear God's voice - calling. All over Germany there are Daniels and Wendys - guides and artists, writers and historians and documentarians, performers, thinkers, talkers, doers - people into whose ears God has whispered, saying: be the witnesses, tell the stories - draw the people closer to one another, draw the people closer to Me.

Shabbat shalom