

Tzav 5784
Making Space
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Our son once asked our rabbi why God doesn't split the sea for us anymore. Our son was maybe four years old. The Rabbi replied that maybe God does split the sea for us all the time, and we're too busy rushing through to notice. He gave an example: "When your parents met, he said to our son, "they probably had no idea that they had just met the person they would marry."

The Book of Vayikra, whose second parashah we read today, begins, of course with the word "Vayikra," he called. ויקרא אל משה וידבר ה' אל משה--He called Moshe, and God spoke to him. It is a bumpy verse sparking much commentary and made stranger by the last letter, the Aleph, being scribed in every Torah scroll smaller than all of the other letters. We could almost mistake the word "Vayikra"--he called-- for the word, "ויקר," the same letters minus the little Aleph, which would render the verse "He happened upon Moshe"--not a call, but more of a casual, chance encounter.

Some encounters are little more than two people being in the same place at the same time--chance encounters, "Vayikar," while others, as we know, can be life changing--"Vayikra." We don't necessarily know which one we are having while it's happening. Sometimes, when an encounter results in bad feelings, we look back and say, "If only I had known what would happen, I might have handled it differently from the start."

There is a way to enter even a potentially challenging encounter--a way that invites positive connection. I'd like to spend some time thinking about that with you today, beginning not with our parashah but with a famous episode from the First Book of Kings.

God called to Elijah, awakening him from his sleep in a cave somewhere on Mount Sinai. "WHY ARE YOU HERE?" God asked.

"I AM MOVED BY ZEAL FOR THE ETERNAL, THE GOD OF HOSTS," said Elijah.
"THE ISRAELITES HAVE FOSAKEN YOU! THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS AND PUT YOUR PROPHETS TO THE SWORD! I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE OUT TO KILL ME!"

“COME OUT,’ God said, “AND STAND ON THE MOUNTAIN BEFORE ME.” There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Holy One, but the Holy one was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake, but the Holy One was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Holy One was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still, small voice” (I Kings 19).

In that still, small voice, God asks again, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

There is something remarkably captivating about this encounter. God asks Elijah “why are you here?” twice. The first time, Elijah answers with a swirl of emotions: I am zealous for you! The Israelites have abandoned you! They are hunting me down! They want to kill me!”

And God shows God’s own disposition at that moment. Ferocious wind, earthquake and fire emanate from the Holy One.

In fact, Mount Sinai is not where Elijah belongs. God knows this when God asks, “WHY ARE YOU HERE?” But Elijah is too wrought up to hear how deep the question runs. He is not in a frame of mind to engage deeply, and he erupts in staccato blasts of zeal, anger, and fear. It seems that God is not ready for a meaningful encounter, either. God orders Elijah out of the cave—COME OUT HERE! and then erupts in wind, earthquake, and fire.

Only from a quiet murmur can God ask in a way that Elijah can hear and understand what he needs to do, and where.

In this encounter there is a detail I never noticed before studying the opening *parashot* of Vayikra. It comes after the still, small voice, before God asks Elijah for the second time, “why are you here?”

The first time, Elijah does not come out at God’s command. Only *after* the earth, wind, and fire frenzy, when Elijah hears the still, small voice—only then does he wrap his mantle about his face and go out. And *then* God asks, quietly, implicitly, the penetrating, transformative question Elijah needs to contemplate: “Where *should* I be?”

God has essentially quieted the room and created a space for meaningful encounter. Now the two can hear and be heard.

When I studied with Rabbi Jordan Bendat Appell, at his invitation we would spend the first five minutes in silence (his idea). We created a sacred space for our encounter with

texts, ideas, and one another. Five minutes is a long time to sit in silence with another person, especially at the beginning of an encounter. Once in a while I ask someone to sit quietly with me before we engage in work together. It is powerful and intimate, making us much more present to the encounter we are about to experience.

Our *parashah* today deals with many preparations for Divine encounter in the Tabernacle, or *Mishkan*, also known as the *Ohel Mo'ed*—the Tent of Meeting. The priestly preparations culminate in a seven-day time apart during which time they prepare themselves internally to encounter God on behalf of the people. Seven days for God, seven days for the priests; it's like a new Creation. The priests must create the space of encounter in their hearts before they can serve and welcome all of the people into the sacred work they will perform on their behalf.

Even Moshe may not enter God's Tent of Meeting—the *Ohel Moed*, or *Mishkan*—without first being called in. This inviting and accepting is necessary, even though God and Moshe are already well acquainted. In the Midrash, Rabbi Zarika asks, “Would you really think that Moshe had *left* God's presence and gone somewhere where God was not with him, and thus needed God to call him in? [No, Moshe regularly felt God's presence, much like our loved ones are with us wherever we go; we feel them with us even when we are physically apart.] But Moshe, in his deep and great humility, [waited for the space to be created. He waited to be called in. And God called him in, creating that space, by invitation.]

There are times when we may experience an encounter with someone we know, where we really want to share something—maybe something we've been thinking about all day, and now there they are, and we just can't wait to get started. Maybe we're feeling bad about something in the relationship between ourselves and the other, and we want to share how we feel; we want to share what happened from our perspective. And if we are on our game, sort of, then we might take a fraction of a moment, or a second, to think about the words that we say, to control ourselves from erupting in a storm of words, or God forbid, in a rage. And yet, however “nic”e the words we think we said sound in our minds, sometimes we don't get the validating hearing we think we deserve. The person we're speaking to may be distracted, not fully listening, or defensive. They may become angry. And very often, I think, that is because we stepped over the threshold of the other person's emotional space without mutually inviting a space for encounter. I have heard some describe that kind of emotional rushing in as an act of violence.

Many of us practice creating intentional space for encounter purposefully in our professional lives. “Do you have time to talk with me about X?” we might ask a

coworker. “Would you like to set up a time to talk further about Y?” We might ask a client or patient or congregant. But in the relationships that matter most personally—those relationships with whom we are closest, with whom we are less careful, we may be less inhibited. Rabbi Zarika, in the Midrash, describes Moshe as not being haughty in his heart. He compares Moshe to a person who is accustomed to speaking with a sovereign, a servant or advisor who regularly goes in and comes out [of the throne room] without invitation, and becomes haughty through that treading over the threshold, over and over, without invitation on a regular basis.

I think that can happen sometimes with us, in our relationships—that we rush in, and we are less inhibited, and maybe even, sometimes haughty in our hearts, when what we really need is a sensitive and gentle approach toward a loving encounter that can only come from a place of humility. In our intensity we fail to seek a mutual agreement to enter a space of relationship that we must create together.

Most of our encounters may be more incidental than profound, out there in the world and in the space of our homes. But it does not have to be that way, I think. Any encounter with another human being, I believe, is a Divine encounter. And one tiny, silent, letter Aleph can change a chance meeting or a casual, incidental conversation, and call us into deeper connection. The Aleph makes no sound on its own. It needs us to vocalize it intentionally.

And so, may our intentions shape sacred space for us to encounter one another and may our conversations, even of the ordinary, add holiness to our world.