

Friends,

I'm speaking to you in isolation, from my home in London. I wanted to express our thanks to all those who are fighting on the frontline of COVID-19. The doctors, the nurses, the keyworkers, the support staff, the teachers, the people filling the shelves in our supermarkets and our pharmacies. There are a lot of heroes out there, and they deserve our thanks.

I don't know about you, but this is, for me, a very scary time. The world is at war with an invisible enemy, and many people are feeling very, very anxious about the future. So if you are too, you're in good company. But at the same time, there have been some really extraordinarily good things happening. Jewish communities throughout the world have been reaching out to the lonely, to the vulnerable, to the people who need help. They've done so very creatively using social media. They've even been doing other people's Pesach shopping, you name it, the community has been there. Jews do community, do *kehillah*, exceptionally well, and we've seen communities creatively at their very best.

Something else has happened. I don't know if you've noticed it (probably you have. I tend to be the last person to notice these things) and that is the sheer humour that is going around about what's happening. I think probably everyone does this. Humour is deeply connected to humanity. But I do think the humour coming out of Jewish communities and out of Israel is quite exceptional. Really very, very funny. I'm not going to spoil any of it for you, but do look on the social media and on YouTube and connect up with some sources about it.

And it solved for me, a problem that I always had. Hakodesh Baruch Hu was absolutely insistent that the first Jewish child born was to be called Yitzchak, meaning 'he will laugh'. And until now, I always wondered what on earth Yitzchak had to laugh about. His very birth created a split in the family and led to the dismissal of Yishmael and Hagar. Then came the Binding which was traumatic by its very nature. And then in old age he finds himself deceived by his son Yaakov when he wants to give a blessing of love to his son Eisav.

What on earth did Yitzchak laugh about in his lifetime? And then I suddenly realised this week that this name, this word, wasn't assigned for him alone, but for the entire future of the Jewish people. Because here we are in the midst of the worst health crisis for a hundred years. And Jews, not only Jews, but especially Jews have been helping one another laugh. And what we can laugh at, we can survive.

And that, to me, has been very, very beautiful. What we can laugh at does not hold us captive in fear. So please watch and share all the humorous little videos on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc. that you can find because they really do lift your spirits. And then there've been little moments like when I was doing my shiur, live, last week, my little grandson, Zev, WhatsApp'd me during the broadcast. The first time this has ever happened to me in my life. And I found that really thrilling. This morning I was talking to my beloved friend, Rabbi Lionel Rosenfeld, who is the Rabbi at the Western Marble Arch Synagogue. Of course there are no minyanim taking place there, but normally on an ordinary weekday, it's not actually that easy to get a good minyan there. "This morning", said Rabbi Lionel, "I had 2000 people for minyan on shacharit".

Of course he was doing it through Zoom I think, or through WhatsApp or however he did it. Somehow or other, this crisis brought about the biggest ever weekday morning minyan for the Western Marble Arch Synagogue. And I guess things like that must be happening around the world.

Let us listen very carefully to what the Gemara in Eiruv, 54a says, "חש בראשו יעסוק בתורה"

"Chash barosho ya'asok baTorah" Meaning, 'If your head aches, study Torah.'

What does this week's parsha have to say about where we are here and now? I want to share with you a very personal thought that speaks to me. It is focused on just one word, the opening word of the parsha, which gives its name not only to the parsha, but to the whole book: 'Vayikra' meaning 'and God called'. This is how our book begins. 'He [God] called to Moses, and He spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying....'

Now, if you look at the word 'Vayikra' in a Sefer Torah, you will see that the *aleph*, the last letter of the word Vayikra, is always written very small. It's an *aleph ze'eirah*, a small aleph. So the word looks at first glance like 'vayikar' and Rashi basing himself on the Midrash says the following. He says every time that God spoke to Moses and every time He gave him a command, these were prefaced by a *karia*: 'Vayikra', God summoned him. Rashi says, that is '*lashon chibar*'. That is an expression of love, of preciousness. But in contrast, when He spoke to the prophets of the nations of the world (and here Rashi is referring to Bilaam), it says *vayikar* instead. '*Vayikar Elokim el Bilaam*', meaning God just 'happened' to Bilaam. What Rashi is doing, and this is absolutely fundamental to what I want to share with you, is he's making a clear distinction between two words that look very, very similar. '*vayikar*', and he happened to, he chanced upon and '*vayikra*', and He called.

In fact, we can put it slightly differently. The Hebrew words '*mikra*' and '*mikre*', '*mikra*' with the letter *aleph*, '*mikre*' with the letter *hey*. *Mikra* means a call and *mikre* means pure chance. What is the difference between a call and a chance? That is the message within the first word of Vayikra and I realised many years ago that deep insight can be shed on this if we look at the *end* of Vayikra. The end of Vayikra, parshat Bechukotai, contains a passage called the *tochecha*, the curses, and a key word of the curses is the word *Keri*, spelled *k-r-y* (*kaf, reish, yud*)

During the curses, the *tochecha*, we are warned, "If you don't listen to Me, [says God] and you walk towards Me with *keri*, then I will behave towards you with the anger of that *keri*." Now what does the word *keri* mean? It's a very important word. It appears seven times in chapter 26, the penultimate chapter of Vayikra, and it appears nowhere else in the whole of Tanach. So it's clearly a key word.

When a word appears seven times, that's a key word, but also it's worth noting that it appears nowhere else. So the commentators have to guess what it means, because there's no clue from context elsewhere in Tanach. And so they say it means: rebelliously, overconfidently, refusing, hardening yourselves, etc. etc. or, If you walk *indifferently* to Me. However, the Rambam says something completely different. He says this not in one of his commentaries or in his philosophical work, but in the Mishne Torah where he deals with the *halachot*, the laws of a public fast. He writes at the opening of Hilchot Ta'anit: 'It is a positive command of the Torah to cry and sound the trumpets on any tragedy or any distress that happens to the community.' That's a biblical command, to sound the alarm. And then he says, "This is one of the ways of *t'shuvah*, such that when bad things happen, you resolve to come closer to God." And then he says, and this is the key, "but if they don't

sound the alarm, and if they say “this just happened”, “Things happen”, and “this suffering is mere chance” then that is bad news and it causes them to cling to their bad behaviour.”

“And that is what the Torah means,” Rambam continues, “when it says ‘If you act indifferently to Me and you see this as mere chance, then I will leave you to mere chance.’”

Rashi's comments at the beginning of Vayikra and the Rambam's comments on the end Vayikra are saying the same thing. That there is a very slight difference between things that happen by chance and things that are in some sense a call from God to come closer to Him. The difference is an *aleph*, and an *aleph* is silent.

In fact the difference is a little *aleph*, and the little *aleph* is almost invisible, but that is the difference between *Vayikra*, ‘and God called’ and *vayikar*, ‘he just happened’. And that is really how the book of Vayikra begins and ends, saying yes, in one sense events are mere chance. In one sense. In the case of this pandemic it was a viral mutation that was almost randomly caught and transmitted and has now affected a quarter of the world's population who are in lockdown as I speak.

That is chance, but perhaps also specifically in our isolation at a time when we have the opportunity to listen to our soul, to our mind, to our heart in a way that we don't have at other times because we are so busy interacting with other people, perhaps also in our isolation, we can hear God's very quiet call. A little *aleph*, almost silent. He's asking us to question, is there someone I should call? Is there someone I should help? Is there someone I should thank? Is there a prayer I should be saying? Is there a text I should be learning? Is there a mitzvah I should be doing?

Is there something that I have been neglecting until now because I felt just too busy and now that I am in this isolation, in this silence, able to hear, able to think of? That is what *vayikra* means. It means an almost silent call, but one which we hear at moments of loneliness. Sometimes the really difficult times are the times of growth. They don't seem so at the time. But when we look back, we see they were. The help we give others at difficult times is a good deed that is never forgotten ever.

So I just think that it is worth thinking in these times: Can I somehow, underneath this all, hear that still small voice of Hashem saying to me, use this time of being at one with yourself to listen and to hear and to heed and to do and to grow, and thereby become strong by giving strength to others because it is not only to Moshe Rabbeinu that *vayikra*, ‘God calls’, but to all of us.

May we hear and heed His voice and may He hear and heed ours when we pray to Him. Please end this terrible time and send a *refua shlaima* to the *cholei amecha*, and to the *cholei olam*. To those of your people and those of all peoples who are ill, grant them a speedy recovery. And grant us all the chance to re-engage with life again.

Be well, and have a Shabbat Shalom.