

In Every Generation

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Why Twice?

Avraham held the blade aloft, prepared to slaughter a son, a dream, a nation. The inspiring Exodus, the revelation at Sinai, the Mishkan hosting G-d in a home of human construction, the union of Jew and Land and Torah, the civilization of King David, the prophets and exile and redemption, the Messianic era—the fate of Creation¹ hung in the balance while an old man readied his hand—until a voice broke the silence, calling, "Avraham! Avraham! Don't send forth your hand to the youth, do not inflict anything upon him!"²

Troubled by the Divine decision to call the name of our patriarch twice, Rabbi Chiyya³ suggests that this is meant as *לשון חבה ולשון זרון*, an expression of love or urgency. Alternatively, our sages⁴ contend that the double language declares that Avraham retained his humility even after G-d spoke with him; Avraham was the same before and after he rose to greatness.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, though, offers a unique explanation.⁵ Noting that an identical double-call is issued to Yaakov, Moshe and Shemuel, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov presents a provocative guarantee.

G-d spoke to them and [in the second mention of their names] to subsequent generations. There is no generation which lacks an Avraham, there is no generation which lacks a Yaakov, there is no generation which lacks a Moshe, and there is no generation which lacks a Shemuel.

אמר לו ולדורות, אין דור
שאין בו כאברהם ואין דור
שאין בו כיעקב ואין דור שאין
בו כמשה ואין דור שאין בו
כשמואל

One might read Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's words as a simple pledge that every generation will be blessed with righteous leaders or great prophets, like these men of achievement. However, a review of the circumstances of each doubled summons leads us to a deeper message.

Avraham

At the time of the *akeidah*, Avraham has already declared openly to G-d, "All of Your gifts mean nothing to me, without a child."⁶ He is married to Sarah, who wandered with him in pursuit of their dream, who put her marriage on the line to provide a son, and who was finally rewarded, at

¹ *Shabbat* 88a.

² *Bereishit* 22:11.

³ *Bereishit Rabbah* 56:7.

⁴ *Tosefta, Berachot* 1:14.

⁵ *Bereishit Rabbah* *ibid.*

⁶ *Bereishit* 15:1-3.

the age of 90, for her patient righteousness. Avraham and Sarah have invested their lives in "this child, their only child, their beloved child, Yitzchak"—and now they are to surrender him. The only gift that ever mattered is now to be sacrificed to G-d.

G-d calls out to Avraham at this moment of sacrifice and promises him great blessing⁷—and as Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov explains, He calls out to our dream-sacrificing Avrahams as well.

Yaakov

Yaakov spends most of his life in a state of suffering. First Yaakov is exiled in order to escape his murderous brother Esav, and then he spends 20 years performing hard labor in the house of Lavan. Yaakov returns to Israel only to lose his beloved wife Rachel, see his daughter Dinah taken captive, lose his son Yosef, and have his son Shimon imprisoned. Finally, Yosef was restored, but at a price: Yaakov must enter exile yet again, descending to Egypt.

At this moment,⁸ G-d calls to Yaakov, "Yaakov! Yaakov! Do not fear to descend to Egypt." G-d informs Yaakov that this will not be a true exile; He reassures the patriarch, "I will be with you." And in doubling Yaakov's name, G-d calls to our exiles, as well.

Moshe

The third on the list is Moshe, the Egyptian prince who turns fugitive after rescuing a Jew. A price on his head, Moshe flees to Midian, where he builds a small family with his wife Tziporah, until G-d tells him to return to Egypt and speak to Pharaoh.⁹ Even if those who had wished to kill Moshe are gone, nonetheless, there is grave danger as Moshe abandons his safe haven and returns to the land of a despotic king, of slave drivers and beatings and quotas.

G-d calls to Moshe¹⁰ at this moment of danger and rescue, declaring, "Moshe! Moshe!" G-d continues to reassure Moshe, "I will be with you," giving Moshe miraculous signs to that effect. And as Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov explains, this doubling of Moshe's name cries out to every Jew who has ever launched himself into danger on behalf of others, "You are not truly in danger; G-d is standing beside you."

Shemuel

The last leader on Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's list is Shemuel, who had been brought to the mishkan at the youngest possible age to be apprenticed to Eli, the Kohen Gadol, the religious giant of the generation.¹¹ Shemuel is raised by Eli, who is his surrogate parent, mentor and employer, and Shemuel thrives under his care.¹²

⁷ Bereishit 22:11-18.

⁸ Ibid. 46:2.

⁹ Shemot 3.

¹⁰ Shemot 3:4.

¹¹ Shemuel I 1:24.

¹² Ibid. 2:26.

Unfortunately, Eli's own sons sin horribly, abusing their power,¹³ and G-d rebukes Eli for the corruption carried out on his watch.¹⁴ When the abuse nonetheless continues, G-d summons Shemuel¹⁵ to convey a message of harsh rebuke to Eli:

I am going to do something in Israel that will make people's ears ring. On that day, I will fulfill all of the warnings I have given Eli regarding his household; I will destroy them. Tell Eli that I will sentence his household eternally, for their sins. ... I have sworn to the house of Eli that they will never be able to atone for their transgression with offerings.

Shemuel I 3:11-14

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל שְׁמוּאֵל הִנֵּה אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה דְבָר
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: אֲשֶׁר כָּל שֹׁמְעוֹ תִּצְלִינָה שְׁתֵּי אָזְנוֹ.
בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶקְרָא אֶל יְעֲלִי אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֵל
בֵּיתוֹ הַחֹל וְכָלֵהוּ. וְהִגַּדְתִּי לוֹ כִּי שֹׁפֵט אֲנִי אֶת בֵּיתוֹ
עַד עוֹלָם בְּעוֹן אֲשֶׁר נָדַע כִּי מְקַלְלִים לָהֶם בְּנָיו
וְלֹא כָהָה בָּם. וְלָכֵן גִּשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְבֵית יְעֲלִי: אִם
יִתְּכַפֵּר עוֹן בֵּית יְעֲלִי בְּזִבְחָהּ וּבְמִנְחָהּ עַד עוֹלָם.
שְׁמוּאֵל א ג:יא-יד

In fulfillment of this curse, the entire priesthood would eventually be overturned, the city of Nov would be destroyed, and generation after generation of Eli's descendants would perish in their youth.

Shemuel was responsible to carry this message of rebuke and revolution to the man who was his role model, employer and spiritual guide. G-d introduces this intimidating mission by calling to Shemuel, "Shemuel! Shemuel!" As Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov explains, by doubling Shemuel's name G-d calls to the Shemuels in every generation as they speak righteous truth, however unpopular, to irresponsible authority.

In every generation

There are two *tannaim* named Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, and it is unclear which is the author of this midrash, but both knew well the missions of the aforementioned men. The first Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov lived through the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and saw the starvation and disease of siege, followed by Jewish blood flowing in the streets. The second Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov was a student of Rabbi Akiva, and he survived the fall of the Betar fortress to Hadrian's brutal forces.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov knew the bitter truth of Jewish history: Avraham and his sacrifice, Yaakov and his exile, Moshe and his dangerous mission, and Shemuel and his revolution, are not one-of-a-kind. Every generation will see Jews charged with a mission of revolt against authority. Every generation will see Jews face danger to save other Jews. Every generation will see Jewish families descend into exile. And every generation will see Jewish parents send their children into danger. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov's commentary on the doubled call is, on one level, a horrific promise that the sacrifices are not over, and every generation will know this pain.

However, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov also reassures us. Each time G-d issues this doubled call, we find an explicit biblical declaration that G-d aided the recipient of the call. When G-d called

¹³ Ibid. 2:12-17.

¹⁴ Ibid. 2:27-36.

¹⁵ Shemuel I 3:10.

Avraham, He promised to bless Avraham.¹⁶ When G-d called Yaakov, He said, "I will descend with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up."¹⁷ In directing Moshe to travel to Egypt, G-d pledged to be with him.¹⁸ And with Shemuel, too, we are told that G-d was with him.¹⁹

Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov warns that every generation of Jews will be called upon to deliver an Avraham and a Yaakov, a Moshe and a Shemuel, but this warning comes with a promise that G-d will stand by their sides. We may not always see the protection as Avraham and Moshe and Shemuel did; Yaakov did not see the end of the story in his own lifetime. Nonetheless, G-d will be there by our side.

Finally, in addition to a warning and a reassurance, Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov charges every generation with responsibility. The sacrifice of Avraham and the rescue of Moshe, the exile of Yaakov and the righteous revolution of Shemuel, are not cobwebbed historical phenomena; these are the reality of every Jewish generation. Our names, too, are twice-called to these destinies—and as we read the account of the *akeidah* this Rosh haShanah, it is worth noting that our ancestors expressed a uniform response to the Divine summons. Avraham replied *hineni*, "Here I am," as did Yaakov. Moshe uttered the same word, and so did Shemuel. May we, in our own generations, find the courage to respond likewise.