



## What are You Called to Become?

*New Year Reflections from Rabbi Isabel de Koninck*

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Often in the American secular context, we encounter the concept of a “calling” in its Christian framework. We think of a “calling” as something that happens to you, something that comes to you to tell you what your purpose and direction ought to be in life. In this way of thinking, a calling is singular. Part of the sacred experience of each human is to discern what is one’s true “calling” and what are less sacred callings of ego, fear or selfishness. When we look to the Jewish tradition, we can see traces of this understanding of a calling, but for the most part our tradition imagines a sacred calling in a fundamentally different way.

When God calls out to the Jewish people, it isn’t with an answer or path - it is with a question, often one simple question: “Where are you?” A question not of location, but of deep moral, ethical, and relational whereabouts. The question usually comes in one of two forms - first, as with Adam after he hides, subsequent to him eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, “ayeka” the straight forward “where are you?” Later with our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Moses and so many others, God simply calls out their names in the form of a question - the way we would call for a child or a parent or partner. Maybe it’s a worried “where are you?” as in, I’m afraid for you. Maybe it’s a stern calling, as in, I can see what you’re doing and I don’t like it. Maybe it’s a plea - as in, I

need you, or please help me, or please make the right choice. While the tone modulates each time, the words of Torah themselves are just simply a name on a page - it was our ancestors job, their calling if you will, to discern the tone and the responsibilities that flowed from it. Likewise, it is our job to listen for the question, and to discern the tone of the moment's calling and our responsibilities to it.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, crystalizes this kind of calling from a more contemporary perspective. Writing of his experiences in the camps, he teaches:

*"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct."*

Frankl suggests that contemplating a single purpose or meaning of life is well...meaningless, in that the answer to that kind of question remains in the world of ideas. He suggests instead that we should consider the act of receiving and responding to the world's questions, God's questions, as our highest calling. And the response to those questions must be one of action, not one of thought, ideas or intentions alone.

Often the most important questions can be hard to hear over the din of everyday life - so much rushing to and fro, the world offering so many different ways to satisfy personal desires, so many opportunities to explore the grandest landscapes and the smallest details of the human experience. It can be hard to know which are the questions that should be answered, and which should be ignored. Today, though - much of the chatter has quieted to a dull enough roar for us to hear with clarity the questions that demand to be answered. Living in the midst of this great pandemic

reminding us of the true frailty of the human condition, and in a time where the seams of the American democratic project appear to be failing, in a time when the value of human dignity itself seems to be questioned by at least some who hold or seek to hold power....The world's questions of us pierce through with uncommon clarity.

The way I hear it, it's the same question that God has been asking all along - "where are you?" How are you aligning your values, your priorities, your time and resources to be a part of stitching together the fabric of a new version of our society, one that leaves the threads of systemic racism, of fascism, of indifference to human suffering behind? How are you taking care of yourself to remain healthy of body, mind and spirit? How are you supporting others to do the same?

But the weight of those questions - it is crushing. It is perfectly clear to me why nearly all of our ancestors, when confronted with those questions tried to hide. Needed to be called a 2nd or 3rd time. Chose to run across seas and be swallowed by giant whales, rather than confronting the enormity of the tasks. They're huge and overwhelming.

Our rabbis, in *pirkei avot*, attempted to offer us a salve for that sense of enormity when they taught - *lo alecha hamlacha l'g'mor, v'lo l'hibatel mimena. It's not incumbent upon you to finish the tasks, but neither are you free to desist from it.* But toiling forever with no sense of completion, no sense of a finish line... It takes someone particularly strong of character, and deeply selfless, to work for years, or a lifetime, without a clear sense that there will be any demonstrable progress. This sort of reaction, this kind of fear of the unknown or fear of futility is exactly what Viktor Frankl exhorted against. The finish line is just an idea, an abstract concept, on some level we can't ever know what it will look like, and if we've arrived..well we're probably dead. He suggests that the particulars of the finish line are a distraction, that our focus and our responsibility is to doing the next right thing. That each next right thing is as far into the future as we ever need to

gaze. The uncertainty of the pandemic, of our moment in American history, tells me that Viktor Frankl understood something fundamental about how we face the deepest challenges of the human condition and get to the other side not only with our lives intact, but with our ethics, morals, and fundamental relationships intact as well.

So what is this moment calling me to become? It is calling me simply to do the next right thing, and the one after that, a marathon of a life lived ethically, morally, spiritually well, as best I can. I might slip along the way, I might fall, I might slow down or speed up, but I know I need to keep going.

Each of you, God willing, will translate this moment's calling differently - you'll hear the questions differently and respond the best way you can.

As a Hillel, I hope that we too can respond in kind - there are hard questions ahead of us - about how to model ethical and moral leadership in our campus community, how to support our students, how to inspire them to respond with moral clarity to life's questions. There has never been a more important hour for our work, and I look forward to digging into it together.