

Parashat Vayikra 5780, 2020:

When Small is Great

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Different Jewish ethnicities have varying traditions regarding the proper way a Torah scroll should be written. Yet, *vayikra* — the first word of our *parasha* and the namesake of *Sefer Vayikra* — is universally written with a diminutive *aleph* as its final letter. In his commentary on the Torah entitled, *Ba'al HaTurim*, Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher *zatzal* (1270-1340) provides the following explanation as to why *vayikra* is written in this way:

Moshe was [simultaneously] great and humble. Therefore, he did not want to write “*vayikra*” (and G-d called), rather, he desired to write “*vayikar*” (and G-d happened to appear), which is an expression of a purely accidental meeting. By using *vayikar*, it would be as if Hashem spoke to him in a trance or in a dream, as the Torah states regarding Balaam. [Hashem, however, ruled against this view] and explicitly commanded Moshe to write the *aleph* [in order to represent his true eminence to the world.] Moshe, however, responded to Hashem— based upon his thoroughgoing humility — and told Him that he would only consent to write a miniature *aleph* that would be smaller than any other *aleph* in the Torah; and so he wrote it in this manner. (Translation and brackets my own)

According to Rabbeinu Yaakov’s interpretation, there was palpable tension between Hashem and Moshe, as Hashem perceived Moshe in an entirely different manner than Moshe’s view of himself. In the Almighty’s judgment, Moshe was truly great and ever His faithful servant, for with Moshe alone did He: “... speak mouth to mouth; in a [direct] vision and not in riddles.” Moreover, only Moshe, of all the prophets, was able to see *marot* — visions of the Almighty. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:8, this and all Tanach

translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Clearly, as Moshe was different than any other human being who has ever lived, Hashem sought to give voice to this idea by writing *vayikra* as the first word of our *parasha*.

In stark contrast, Moshe was so humble that he described Aharon and himself as, “*v’nachnu mah* — of what significance are we?” (*Sefer Shemot* 16:7,8) Little wonder, then, that the Torah famously teaches us, “*V’ha’ish Moshe anav m’ode mi’kol ha’adam asher al p’nai ha’adamah* — Now this man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:3) The last thing Moshe wanted, therefore, was to write *vayikra*, rather than *vayikar*. As such, he was faced with a true dilemma: How could he follow the command of the Master of the Universe while remaining existentially true to himself? Moshe’s solution was an elegant compromise: He wrote *vayikra* with a tiny *aleph* as its concluding letter, thereby implementing Hashem’s *p’sak* (decision) while maintaining his personal integrity.

Anivut (humility) unmistakably emerges as one of the driving forces of Moshe’s personality. Based upon a variety of midrashic sources, it appears that this *middah* (ethical characteristic) was woven into his very being. Most of us, however, need to work at developing this *middah*. We are fortunate that the Ramban (1194-1270) gives us ready guidance as to how to undertake this process:

Therefore, I will now explain to you how to always behave humbly. Speak gently at all times... with your heart focusing on Hashem... In all your actions, words and thoughts, always regard yourself as standing before Hashem, with His *Schechinah* [Divine Presence] above you, for His glory fills the whole world. Speak with fear and awe, as a servant standing before his master. Act with restraint in front of everyone. When someone calls you, don’t answer loudly, but gently and softly, as one who stands before his master. (*Iggeret HaRamban*, translation, with my emendations, <http://www.pirchei.com/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>, brackets and italics my own)

Two salient points emerge in this section of the *Iggeret HaRamban* that guide us toward the acquisition of *anivut*: Our encounters with others should embody respect, and our minds and hearts should be focused upon Hashem with the conscious recognition that we ever stand before His Divine Presence.

With the Almighty's help and our fervent desire, as we follow the Ramban's roadmap for acquiring *anivut*, may we fulfill the verse, "And you shall do what is proper and good in the eyes of the L-rd" (*Sefer Devarim* 6:18). In so doing, may we choose the path that is "harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for all humankind." (*Pirkei Avot* II:1) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.