

Parashat Vayikra 5783, 2023:

A Small Aleph

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Why is “*vayikra*,” the first word of our *parasha*, and the namesake of *Sefer Vayikra*, 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 an intriguing explanation:

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 Bilam. [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 viewed himself. In the Almighty’s judgment, Moshe was truly great and ever His faithful servant, for we know that 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 Hashem. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:8, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Clearly, Hashem sought to publicize Moshe’s unique nature by writing *vayikra* in its standard manner as the first word of our *parasha*. Moshe’s unparalleled *anavah* (humility), however, was at odds with this, and he therefore wrote “a miniature *aleph* that would be smaller than any other *aleph* in the

Torah.”

The Chasidic *rebbe*, Rav Simcha Bunim Bonhardt of Peshischa *zatzal* (1765-1827), is cited as having said a beautiful *mashal* (parable) that illustrates the depth of Moshe’s *anavah* and advances our understanding of the miniature *aleph*:

Vayikra is written with a tiny *aleph*. The reason for this may be explained by the following *mashal*: There was a valiant man whom the king elevated to higher and higher levels [of power and authority] until he was raised above all his other officers. On one occasion, the king sought to ascertain if he [the intrepid individual] maintained the same level of awe toward him as he had in earlier times. He [the king], therefore called upon him to come to him. And this officer, being that he was truly humble in his self-perception, came before the king and presented himself in awe and fear in exactly the same manner as he had done in the past [prior to achieving his fame and glory]. The referent of this parable is Moshe, whom the Holy One blessed be He, raised up [above all others] and performed, through his agency, countless miracles and *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah). Nonetheless, when He called to him [at the beginning of our *parasha*,] it was with a miniature *aleph* [at Moshe’s behest]. (*Sefer Kol Simcha*, Parashat Vayikra, translation and brackets my own)

Anavah emerges as a constitutive element of Moshe’s very being. In contrast, most of us must work at developing this *middah* (ethical characteristic). We are fortunate that the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) gives us ready guidance as to how to undertake this process:

Speak gently at all times... with your heart focusing on Hashem... In all your actions, words, and thoughts, 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 my own)

Two salient points emerge that guide us toward the attainment of *anavah*: Our encounters with others should embody respect and dignity, and we must focus upon Hashem, ever conscious that we stand before His Divine Presence. With the Almighty’s help, may our efforts to achieve these goals enable us to fulfill Moshe’s clarion call to the Jewish people: “And you shall do what is proper and good in the eyes of Hashem.” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:18). *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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