

Jessie could not have picked a worse week to come home for a visit. Parashat Vayikra? What am I supposed to do with this material? Give me any other parashah and I can pull something out of my darshan's bag of tricks, but this parashah is 110 pesukim of fire and smoke, blood and animal parts and rules so arcane they make the Yellow Pages look like a work of great literature. Certain offerings shall be slaughtered on the northern side of the altar, others discarded on the east. Sometimes fingers are dipped in blood, sometimes blood is sprinkled, sometimes dashed, sometimes poured. There are rules for bulls, rules for sheep, rules for goats, rules for turtle doves. There are rules for offerings of grain, fruit, and oil. There are rules governing sin offerings and meal offerings, peace offerings and guilt offerings. And the redundancies! Perek Bet, pasook yod gimel: "You shall salt every one of your meal offering sacrifices with salt, and you shall not omit the salt of your God's covenant from upon your meal offerings. You shall offer salt on all your sacrifices." As a discriminating reader who knows the Torah does not waste words, I am torn between wanting to delve into the reasons that the Torah tells us to make sure that we salt with salt and not, say, pepper. But when I read that sentence I can't help thinking: I get it. The meat should be salty. Let's move on.

For the record, I feel badly about this rotten attitude of mine. Korbanot are part of our peoples' historical record and ethos and, therefore, deserving of study. But the laws of ritual sacrifice are so remote from the daily practice of Judaism, I find it difficult to justify expending much effort on their consideration. Why should I commit the arcane rules to memory? Why should I struggle to comprehend the seemingly incomprehensible? And more to the point, as this week's darshan, what can I possibly offer in the way of insight regarding this topic?

But God is good. In His infinite mercy, he has provided the Vayikra darshan with the raw materials for, excuse the pun, a meaty dvar torah, that does not require an understanding of sacrificial rites. In the first sentence of the parashah it says “VAYIKRa el Moshe, va-yidaber Hashem ailav meh-ohel moed lay-mor.” “And He called to Moshe, and the Lord spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying.”

What is interesting here is if you look in the Chumash, you will see that the aleph at the end of the word va-yikra is smaller than the other letters preceding it. From this deviation from the norm we are able to glean a number of insights about Moshe’s character and relationship with God. Rashi comments that the word va-yikra is a term used by God when speaking with the prophets of Israel, inviting them to a conversation. This courtesy, a measure borne of respect and affinity, was not accorded to the prophets of other nations, as we will see shortly. And yet, Moshe did not feel himself worthy of this term of endearment. Therefore, when he physically transcribed God’s words, Moshe deliberately diminished his own importance by downsizing the aleph.

Interestingly, when you look at the word va-yikra, with its small aleph, it recalls the word “vayiker” which means “and he chanced upon.” This word, which is used in the book of Bamidbar when Hashem appears to the foreign prophet Balaam, implies temporary, incidental communication. In contrast to the ongoing flow of dialogue between Hashem and Moshe throughout the Torah, vayiker could not be a more inappropriate word to describe their relationship. But Moshe’s deep sense of humility and desire to serve without accolades or special attention, compelled him to downplay his importance.

And yet, paradoxically, to be humble requires some measure of pride. Let's take a closer look at what Moshe did. Effectively, he makes a unilateral decision to edit God's work. It is hard to imagine a more prideful act. It implies that Moshe knows better than God and that Moshe's needs are of greater importance than God's. Perhaps the degree to which such behavior can be seen in a positive light is a function of intent and personal track record. Moshe never sought the glare of publicity and even after decades of achievement and close personal connection to God, never believed his own, well-deserved hype.

There's a lovely midrash relating to this. When Moshe finished writing the Torah, there was a bit of ink left over from his deciding to not write a full-size aleph. And yet, instead of being angry with Moshe that he had not transcribed God's words exactly as dictated, God took the drop of ink and smeared it across Moshe's forehead, giving him a radiant countenance, as famously described in parashat ki tisa: "ki keren ohr panav—a beam or "horn" of light emanated from his face." What an ironic, midah-keneged-midah twist. No matter how hard Moshe tried, he could not escape the destiny Hashem intended for him; even the ink he withheld to reduce his status was, itself, used to create the opposite effect.

I think, however, there is another lesson we can derive from Moshe's miniature aleph. We learn that God is everywhere, in full-size script and small, even when He seems hidden, and even in places you might least expect to find Him. The God of Exodus, who splits seas, uproots mountains, and travels in pillars of cloud and fire, is also the God who can be found, as the prophet Eliyahu is told in the Book of Kings, in the "bat kol" or "still, small voice." Rabbi Berel

Wein comments that looking for God in large and great events is fine, and there He will be found, but that “the still, small voice is the truest representation of God and his omnipotence.”

*The still, small voice is the truest representation of God and His omnipotence.*

Quite a statement. But what of mortal beings? Created in God’s image, there must be a still small voice residing deep within each of us as well. How do we access it? How do we actualize it? How do we harness its powers? What sacrifices are we willing to make in order to attain God’s lofty expectations?

In 1925, the great Hebrew poet, Shaul Tchernichovsky, published a long poem called *Man Is Nothing But*, which addresses his feelings about exile and the idea of the wandering Jew. But there is a section in the poem that seems to have been written with parashat Vayikra in mind though, as a thoroughly secular Jew, Tchernichovsky’s poetry was not particularly informed by the Bible. It goes as follows:

Man is nothing but the soil of a small country,  
nothing but the shape of his native landscape,  
nothing but what his ears recorded  
when they were new and really heard,  
what his eyes saw, before they had their fill of seeing—  
everything a wondering child comes across  
on the dew-softened paths,  
stumbling over every lump of earth, every old stone,  
while in a hidden place in his soul, unknown to him,  
there’s an altar set up  
from which the smoke of his sacrifice rises each day  
to the kingdom of the sky, to the stars...

Parashat Vayikra, perhaps as much as any parashah in the Torah, is an enigma. Though the commentators work hard to explain the intricacies of the sacrificial rites, it is simply unclear why God requires the physical act of killing and burning an animal as a sign of devotion. But I am attracted to Tchernichovsky's construct of the hidden place in the soul from which the smoke of sacrifice rises to the kingdom of the sky, for if there is a still, small voice within me, that is where I will find it.