

Parshat Vayikra
“The Small Alef at the Beginning of it All”
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March 24, 2012

I would like to dedicate my comments this morning to someone I never had the privilege of meeting, but wish I had – to Reverend Moshe Rosenfeld z”l; I would like to use my comments this morning to try and explain the importance of Bar Mitzvah – specifically in our case, Liron’s Bar Mitzvah and to tie these comments to the meaning of an *aufruf* in anticipation of the marriage of Stephanie and Brian and I will try and accomplish all of this by telling you a little about my week and this weeks *parasha*.

First a word about my week: Edy and I had one of those parental moments this week, one of those out of body moments when you feel – not like a participant, but more like an observer to your own life. You are in the moment, but somehow not of the moment. Your eyes see all that is before you, your ears take in all the appropriate sounds, your body senses the right temperature and all of the things it should be aware of – but somehow there is a disconnect between the data and the drama – the moment and the meaning.

Our son Ari delivered his Senior Sermon in the Seminary Synagogue this past Wednesday before an assemblage of his classmates, faculty, family and some close friends. The Senior Sermon is a rite of passage for rabbinical students – I remember delivering my senior sermon 34 years ago before some of the very same faculty, although many of my teachers, Saul Liberman, Louis Finkelstein, Moshe Zucker, Max Kiddushin, Yochanan Muffs and so many others have long since passed on. As you can imagine – a sermon delivered before such an assemblage is unlike any other you will ever prepare or deliver – these are your classmates you have studied with, these are your teachers, the leading lights of a generation – and you are being asked to preach to them! Was I more nervous 34 years ago when I delivered my senior sermon – or Wednesday as I waited for my son to deliver his? Any parent knows the answer to that question!

It was Edy who captured the moment best, as she usually does, when she stated – “I couldn’t figure out what we had done to produce this mature, intelligent, sensitive young man who was so competently speaking before us – I know we had something to do with it – I just couldn’t imagine what and how.”

Ari taught about this weeks torah portion *Vayikra*. Now *Vayikra* is not an easy section of the torah to speak on. It does not contain the absorbing stories of the book of Genesis, or the dramatic events of the book of Exodus – rather it contains the first chapters of the Book of Leviticus and the rather dry, uninspiring laws regarding the myriad of details of the ancient sacrifices which were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem more than 2000 years ago. And yet, there must be something compelling about this *parasha*, as the rabbis chose it – *Vayikra*, and sacrifices as the one with which all children began their study of Torah.

While generations of Jewish students have suggested that it was a latent masochism common to all teachers, which accounted for this custom of beginning with *Vayikra* - I am not so sure.

The *midrash* suggests a charming reason for this custom: “Little children are pure and the

sacrifices are pure; so let those who are pure occupy themselves with things that are pure.”

That's nice - but I suspect there is yet another reason why Jewish youngsters began their Torah studies with *Vayikra*.

It is just possible that *Vayikra* - may contain the single most important truth that the Torah and Judaism have to teach us. A truth that is so basic and so important that our teachers wanted to impress upon young minds, at the earliest opportunity the inescapable truth - that sacrifice is at the very center of life. That nothing worthwhile in life will ever be accomplished without it.

In his *drasha* – Ari focused on the very first word of today's reading, the very opening word of *Sefer Vaykra* – the word, *Vayikra*.

“The Book of Leviticus opens with the word *Vayikra* which means “And then He called...” The subject is God, the object is Moshe and the purpose of the call is to give instructions as to the proper performance of various sacrificial rites.” Ari went on to point out and many of us are aware, that there is a peculiarity in the way this first word *Vayikra* is written. It is written in the torah with a small *alef*. For thousands of years, whenever a scribe has taken to writing a new torah they have followed this sacred tradition of ensuring that the last letter of the first word of the book of Leviticus is always written slightly smaller than all the others. Most sources offer no insight for this peculiarity other than, “tradition” – but some try their hand at further explanations and Ari quoted one such source, the *Baal Haturim* who offered that this was yet another example of Moses' greatness as expressed through his remarkable humility. You have to picture *Moshe Rabeynu* sitting there, taking dictation from God – writing the torah down as the Holy One Blessed Be He slowly and patiently dictated each and every word to him. According to the Baal Haturim, Yaakov ben Asher who lived in the 13th century, when they got to this word, *Vayikra*, *Moshe* was embarrassed to write it down. *Vayikra* – And God called him – to which Moshe thought to himself, “Who am I that God should call me? I am nothing, dust and ashes, how could I possibly write that God called me? Rather I will write *Vaykar* – I will leave off the last alef and thereby change the meaning *Vayikra*, minus *alef* is another word totally – which means – “And He happened” – that is – “God happened upon me, He chanced upon me” – much more appropriate thought Moses than He the Holy One chose to speak to ME! But God noticed this change and corrected Moses – “that is not what I said, add the *alef*.” And what ensued was a negotiation in which Moses pleaded to at least be allowed to write the *alef* smaller than all the other *alefs* in the torah.

And Ari's point was that of all of Moshe's attributes, his humility is one of his most cherished qualities and we could learn from his example that in order to serve God we need to diminish the *alef* that is our own ego; the *Ani* that gets in the way of serving *Atah*. Moses understood this fact and he put a little reminder in the torah so that we could learn it too.

Now Ari went on to develop this in his own wonderful way, a way that certainly made us all proud – but this morning I would like to use his point to illuminate our moment – a moment of celebration of a *Bar Mitzvah* and an *aufruf* – a moment of pride and fulfillment as parents see their children as I saw mine – growing and developing and becoming adults in their own right and if struggling to make sense of what is happening right before our eyes.

In our age of instant self-gratification, self-indulgence, and self-absorption- we need, now more than ever, to pay attention to the lessons of *Vayikra* that life's greatest gifts are the ones we give; not the one's we get. An entire book of the torah dedicated to the concept of sacrifice – to the notion that at the very center of the torah is a book that teaches us how to give.

“Come to shul,” I tell people. “Get involved!” I plead. “And if I do?” they ask, “what’s in it for me?” “What will I get out of it?” “I don’t know rabbi – I sat in shul for three hours – it didn’t do anything for me.” “Hebrew School – really rabbi? We are busy building a resume here – do you really think Hebrew school will look as good to the colleges as soccer or tennis?”

When Isaac Stern concluded a concert recital one evening, he was approached by an ardent admirer who exclaimed rapturously: “Oh Mr. Stern, I would give anything to be able to play the violin as magnificently as you do!” To which the maestro replied softly: “Would you give 12 hours a day?”

My friends, that is the crucial question *Parshat Vayikra* that this week’s Torah portion poses to us. Life is not only about wanting - it is also about giving. Too many of us view life as a giant cafeteria, where you think everything is neatly laid out for the choosing - food, clothing, power, privilege, success - all we have to do is reach out and take it - and it is ours. This, my friends is not life - this is a caricature of life.

Life, the Torah would remind us is an altar - not a cafeteria. And the things that go on an altar are sacrifices. And until we have learned that basic truth we are not yet ready for mature and meaningful living.

This is the essential message of what it means to become a Bar Mitzvah. Liron, all the work and the effort to stand on this *Bima* and participate in this sacred service - the years of Jewish education, the mastery of Hebrew, the Bar Mitzvah lessons, the practice and practice and practice - is all to teach the fundamental lesson that without sacrifice nothing worthwhile can be achieved. Great character, great lives - all are built on sacrifice.

And Stefanie and Brian – sacrifice is at the core of marriage as well. Marriage is not about getting, it is about giving. It is not about finding that one someone who gets you – but finding that one someone to whom you want to give yourself – wholly and completely. Marriages work best not when they are mutually self-serving but when they are selfless. Making your *alef* smaller, making your *ani* smaller – is the key to a successful marriage.

And that is also why I dedicated this sermon to Rev Moshe Rosenfeld z”l who served this congregation for many years before his death. Liron – Rev Rosenfeld was your Saba, and like me you didn’t know him – but I hope you have heard as many wonderful stories about him as I have. And it is sometimes difficult to picture people we never met – so Liron if you want some help in trying to picture your *saba* – I would suggest the image I opened with might be helpful – because it is the image that works for me. It is that image of Moshe humbly and modestly taking God’s dictation – Moshe who is so embarrassed by God’s choice that he literally wants to change the words of God’s torah out of a sense of incredible modesty – Moshe who realizes it is not about him and so he wants to minimize his sense of self out of an enormous love of God and torah.

In *shuls* (as in life) a lot of attention gets focused on the bema – on the rabbi and cantor and those who occupy the big stage. But the real work – is what goes on before we ever get to the bema. Every day when I walk down the hall and see your *savta* lovingly and patiently teaching our children – one by one – sitting in a small office – just as she taught you Liron, -- asking for no attention, demanding no fanfare, embarrassed by any focus on her--- I can’t help but think – this is where the real work of torah is taking place, this is the real model of torah that we must

teach, this is the small *alef* of *Vayikra* – it is alive and it is well – here at Temple Beth Shalom and it was embodied by your *saba* Rev Moshe Rosenfeld z”l and it is embodied by your *savta* Zahava Rosenfeld who took up his work after he died.

How many children over the years were nurtured by their love and their guidance, their modesty and their dedication? I have told you Liron, that I have a friend who is 60 years old, from Grand Rapids, Michigan who lovingly speaks of your *saba* was the most important religious influence on his life from when he was your age.

Moshe Rosenfeld taught us, *Moshe Rabeynu* taught us, *Sefer Vayikra* teaches us, your Bar Mitzvah Liron and your *aufruf* Stefanie and Brian comes to teach you – that life is about giving more than getting. Sacrifice is the altar upon which a meaningful life should be built.

“No religion is worth its salt,” wrote Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, “ which does not make great demands upon its adherents...Too many of our people want an easy going religion, one which does not interfere with their leisure, their sleep, or their television, which calls for no study and no observance; which does not challenge or disturb them; a religion without any spiritual travail, without any stab of thought or conscience, without any sacrifices, the religion of a self-pampering people. No religion”, he concludes, “has ever survived that kind of emotional and intellectual vacuum. Judaism least of all.”

There is a small *alef* at the end of the first word of the book of Leviticus. This past week, a father was taught that by his son – remember the small *alef* at the end of *Vayikra* and you will begin to understand the meaning of it all.