

Vayikra 5784

March 23, 2024

Responding to Aliza Bashi and Wren Rothstein

Aliza and Wren, what thoughtful divrei Torah you've offered us this morning on a very difficult and gory parasha. Out of an archaic practice that most of us find repugnant, you both managed to discern meaningful lessons that speak to us today. Wren, you grappled with the question of sacrifice as a way of reaching toward something higher. The idea that we are animals, and yet there's something about us that's more sublime. And the word korban, which we translate as sacrifice, really means to draw near to that more elevated aspect of our being. Aliza, you grappled with the requirement that the sacrifices be healthy and unblemished, or perfect, and what you learned was that this represented the idea of dedication and effort – giving your best, or trying your hardest, even being willing to do something unpleasant for a greater good.

I want to pull these ideas together. The idea of sacrifice as a way of reaching toward something higher. The idea of dedication and effort, of giving your best and trying your hardest and even being willing to do something unpleasant for a greater good.

The very first word of our parasha, the word that became the name of this entire book of Torah is Vayikra, and it means G-d called. The thing that's interesting about this word is that the last letter is an aleph, a silent letter. And in the Torah, this word is written with an unusually small aleph. Every Torah scroll has a small aleph in this word, and only in this one place in this one word. Why?

Let's remember what's going on here, and let's go back to the beginning of the story. And what I'm about to say was influenced by teachings by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. G-d creates the world and creates human beings Adam and Eve to be G-d's partner on the earth. But then humanity screws up–

they become murderous and corrupt, and by the time Noah comes along humanity is so depraved, so completely full of violence and corruption that G-d gives up on them and destroys the world. G-d's next strategy is to start with one family – Abraham and Sarah – and to see if maybe this one family can be molded to be ethical. Part of the plan is to make this people be enslaved so that they will learn how terrible it is when human beings harm each other, and they will emerge from that experience committed to doing right in the world. That leads us into the Exodus story, and when our people are freed from centuries of bondage we are led to Mount Sinai where we get principles for how to live with one another in fairness and peace. And now we're no longer a single family, but an entire nation which includes an *erev rav*, a big mix of people who were enslaved with us and are now free with us trying to live by this new way of life. But G-d knows that we will forget the principles or mitzvot, the path of a good life, as different challenges come our way, so G-d instructs us to build a mishkan, a Tabernacle, a meeting place where G-d can dwell in our midst so that we draw near in order to remember again and again and again that our purpose is to dedicate our lives to doing right and doing good.

And, as you taught us Aliza and Wren, the reason that animal sacrifice was the thing we did at the mishkan, was because that was what we knew, it was what all the other peoples around us were doing, so the idea, as the Rambam/Maimonides teaches, was to wean us off of the idolatrous practices of our world one step at a time. And the first big change was that rather than have us sacrifice to an idol, like a golden calf as others were doing with the idea that there were many competing and warring gods, we would sacrifice to a single invisible, intangible, unifying G-d.

And so, at the end of last parasha, after a long building process that everyone participated in, the Tabernacle, the mishkan is complete. And immediately, G-d's presence fills it entirely, so much so that Moses stands outside. Maybe in awe or even fear. That's how the Book of Exodus ends.

And now this week, the next book of Torah begins with Moses standing outside and G-d's voice calling from inside. Rabbi Art Green says, "all the

Torah's narrative has been leading up to this point: the moment of the call to serve....so too are our own narratives. All of our life stories up to this moment are there to prepare us for that call."

And now the question of the small aleph. The rabbis point out that when G-d tells us to build the Tabernacle, the mishkan, G-d says "Build me a mishkan so that I will dwell within them." Not within it, but within them, within the people, within all of the people. Hasidic master Meor Eynayim says "that is why Vayikra is written with a miniature aleph. G-d... is present in miniature form within each Israelite [I'd say person], calling us to return. These are our pangs of conscience, but we do not perceive them as G-d's own call to us." Because it's coming from within, and the aleph is a silent letter telling us to listen.

In the last few weeks I've been witness to something extraordinary. In the context of a terrible, tragic conflict that included the extreme atrocities against our people by the terrorist organization Hamas and a response by Prime Minister Netanyahu's government that has killed tens of thousands of Palestinian people and has 2 million more homeless and starving on the edge of famine, with still more than 130 of our people held hostage in tunnels or other unknown locations, our member, Senator Chuck Schumer, heard that voice, that call from within, and even though he is a highly political man with a ton of political pressure on him, this was something else. He put the calculations of risk aside. He felt compelled, his conscience was calling to him. I saw it. I heard it. And he did something courageous with the goal of bringing us closer to peace.

But the call is not just to Moses and not just to Senator Schumer. This is our people's story of how we've been called, and every people on the earth has been called in its own way. And every one among us, every single person is called in our own way. That's the point. The small aleph of Vayikra is in every one of us. We are all being continually called with a still, small voice from within. And we can hear it if we listen.

Tonight and tomorrow is the holiday of Purim. This holiday is an invitation to joy even in the midst of fear, even in the midst of vulnerability. In the story, the hero is Esther. And when the Jewish people face the threat of annihilation by an enemy who seeks to eliminate us, Esther's conscience within her is awakened, and she decides that she will speak up at great risk to herself. And her words and actions save the Jewish people. Two things about this. First, Esther's name can be read as *Astir*, I will hide, which refers to the idea that G-d has hidden G-d's face and that is why bad things happen to the Jewish people. G-d appears nowhere in the entire Megillah, not even G-d's name is mentioned. Esther's courage shows that even when we can't find G-d in the world, we human beings have the power to do the right thing and even change the course of history. And even though G-d is invisible in the story, you can see G-d in Esther finding herself in the right place at the right time to do something that matters, and you can see G-d in Esther's awakening of conscience, in her ability to listen within to find the right thing to do.

Second, that's not the whole story. At the end of the story, in chapter 9, as they act to defend themselves, the Jewish people of the Persian Empire kill tens of thousands of others. Even though it was just one family or a specific group that tried to kill us, our violence was turned against an entire nation, against tens of thousands of people. The Megillah includes a revenge fantasy that historians believe never actually happened. But this year, it calls out for us to listen. During our Megillah reading tonight, I'm going to make a request of all those who will fill this sanctuary for revelry – and let me be clear, revelry and joy are welcome right now — but I'm going to ask the partygoers to consider silencing their groggers and hushing their voices when we come to chapter 9, the chapter that includes the violence. And I'm going to suggest that we should sit in somber silence to reflect on our impulse for revenge, to reflect on the grave responsibility that comes with holding power, and on the moral imperative to honor human life when we are defending ourselves.

Most of us are not the Senate Majority Leader or the Queen of the Persian Empire. But wherever we stand, wherever we work, wherever we live, whatever school we go to, whatever friendship network we're in, whatever social media universe we find ourselves in, we have some measure of power, some measure of influence. We have a voice. Every one of us. Animal creatures yet more than animals. Able to elevate ourselves to something more sublime. Able to give our best, to try our hardest, to do even unpleasant things in service of a greater good. Able to draw near to the small silent letter within us calling us to our best purpose.

Shabbat Shalom.