Calling Moses

Parashat Vayikra (Leviticus 1:1-5:26)

by Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Jewish tradition instructs that a young child should begin their Jewish education by studying the book of Leviticus. Even a cursory reading of the blood and gore, which make up the sacrificial rites described in the third book of the Torah, would lead most teachers to conclude that these verses would likely be the beginning of the end for a child's Jewish education.

I imagine children running screaming from the *heder* as their teacher describes to them, in detail, how an animal is cut this way and that, its blood sprinkled and splayed upon the alter as a pleasing sacrifice to the Eternal. Granted it was a different time, but just the thought gives me nightmares.

To be fair, the tradition actually gives a reason to start a child with Leviticus. Much of

the book concerns itself with the laws of purity, and as the midrash explains, “Children are pure, so let them start their studies there" (Leviticus Rabbah 7:3). Some commentators further explain that we begin with the teaching of sacrifice to remark from the outset that life involves sacrifice. I cannot disagree with the reasoning, but I think there is another, a more child-friendly reason to introduce our children to the words of Leviticus — although I would start with just one word, the very first word, Vayikra.

In this week's portion, Moses stands outside the Tent of Meeting that the Israelites were commanded to build in the last chapters of Exodus. God's presence fills the tent. Moses, in awe and reverence, remains outside, along with all 600,000 Israelites, waiting to see what happens next, not daring to enter until summoned. The portion therefore begins, "And God called [unto] Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting" (Levitcus 1:1). The great Torah commentator Rashi teaches that it was necessary

for God to call out to Moses because he was outside the tent and God was inside — pragmatically God had to raise his voice to be heard. And so “Vayikra,” "And God called out [to Moses]."

The last letter of Vayikra is alef, and in Torah text itself it is written smaller than all of the other letters of the word — about half the size. Why?

Imagine you are standing with 600,000 people and a voice booms forth from the heavens calling your name. The first time you hear it, I imagine you would be overcome with terror. But if this is a regular occurrence for you, your reaction might be one of self-importance and arrogance. "The boss needs me again. Sorry guys, gotta go — seems he just can't run the world without me." But not Moses; he is humble in the face of all the attention.

How does a tiny alef teach us this? Well, first the word alef by itself means “to teach,” and it

is written in such away that we can see it as both part of the word and separate from it.

But the deeper lesson is to remind us that Moses saw himself as small, like the aleph — he did not read his own press. Moses does not feel inflated because God calls him. If anything, Moses is humble that God singles him out in front of everyone. Remember, it was only two weeks ago in our reading that Moses' humility saved the Jewish people. After the incident with the Golden Calf, God offers to destroy the Children of Israel and find a new people for Moses to lead, but Moses turns it down.

Rashi points out that Moses argues to God that if the Israelites could not survive by the merit of our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they would never be able to survive by the merit of Moses alone. He says, "If a chair of three legs cannot survive God's anger, a chair of one leg will stand no chance."

Maybe we should indeed begin a child's Jewish education with “Vayikra” — not for the blood and gore, but for the example of humility that Moses provides.

Children so often become the center of attention — they need parenting and guidance, they can't drive, they need help with schoolwork. That is appropriate and necessary. But just because we make them the center of our world — in an effort to build them into citizens and menschen, and simply because we love them — that doesn't mean they should think the world revolves around them. Moses was God's “go-to guy” and even he knew to wait to be called instead of busting into the Tent of Meeting and demanding an audience.

A little alef teaches a big lesson about humility. If Moses, for whom seas part and bushes burn can be patient and wait to be called on – then so can our children – indeed so can we all.