“Small and Significant”

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Shabbat Vayikra, March 27-28, 2020

In “normal” times, we arrive at the Book of Leviticus with some hesitation. The gripping sagas of Genesis and the great sweeping drama of Exodus give way to an arcane manual of priestly sacrifices. Animal blood and body parts are everywhere to be seen. The protuberance of the liver takes center stage.

In times of crisis, though, Leviticus turns out to hold some secrets to keeping our sanity and spirits high. Soon we will be glad we are reading that challenging book.

Leviticus focuses our attention on the *limn*, the thin line between life and death. As the humble Israelite offerer brings his sheep or cow or turtle dove to the kohen to atone for wrongdoing or to express gratitude for something wonderful in his life, he understands that the animal is fully alive, and in moments will be absolutely dead.

He places his hands on the head of the living animal, as if to identify with its fate as his own. Then he quickly slaughters the creature. The kohen removes the blood, its totemic life fluid. The offerer and the kohen will share the meat, ingesting its life-giving properties but also its vicarious message.

At that moment the offerer faces a truth larger than the details of his own life. Namely, he sees his story as part of the whole cycle of birth and death and birth again. He realizes that he alone is not the center of the universe. He gains *perspective*, which is crucial for anyone who would stay sane in good times as well as bad.

But before Leviticus launches into the vivid details of animal sacrifice, it presents a mystical meeting of God and Moses. “Vayikra” - God “calls” to Moses from within the newly erected Tent of Meeting. In a moment, God will give Moses the instructions needed by Aaron and his heirs to carry out the customs of sacrifice. But first, God simply presents the divine self to Moses without any cognitive message. This is the quintessential “I and thou” – a meeting with no purpose other than to be alive and present in one another’s company. This is the ultimate “hineni” – “here I am.”

The Torah scroll writes the word Vayikra, “and called” with a tiny letter aleph at the end of the word. No one knows how or when that tradition started, yet every Torah is written with the tiny aleph.

Reb Pinchas of Koretz, the late 18th century Chasidic teacher, recalls that the root of the word aleph appears in an obscure verse in the Book of Job. There it says, “*v’a’alph’cha chochmah*,” meaning something like “and I will teach you wisdom.” Reb Pinchas reasons that the tiny aleph in our text might be hinting at the secret to imparting core wisdom, *chochmah*.

And what is core wisdom? Says Reb Pinchas, the core of wisdom is the teaching of a human being to make himself or herself “small.” Not “small” as in “insignificant.” On the contrary, each person should understand his or her unique purpose and purposefulness in the world. But in order to do so, each person must learn to avoid the evil traits of pridefulness and self-aggrandisement.

Each of us can only learn our significance when we make ourselves as small as the aleph in the word *Vayikra*. That aleph is a sine qua non for the spelling and pronunciation of the word, yet it makes room for the person being called *to,* and not just for the one who is doing the calling.

The Israelite who modestly offers his sacrifice becomes fully humble when he grasps the meaning of his own life in the grand scheme of life and death. Likewise the caller and the called, either to God or to Moses, or to anyone’s fellow human being, can learn how important a role he or she plays in the scheme of life, simply by being like the mighty little aleph: small enough to know that he or she is not the center of the universe, *and* large enough to play a mighty role in bringing sanity and perspective to a topsy-turvy world. That is the job of each of us, especially in this painful time.