

**Sermon: Parshat Vayikra**  
March 28, 2020 / ג' ניסן תש"פ  
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Shabbat shalom and welcome again to everyone who is joining us today via livestream or by calling in. I am so glad that our community is able to offer this opportunity for virtual gathering. I know how important it has been for me to see people on Zoom throughout the week in gatherings for families, for adult learners, and for daily worshippers. As we have been saying, our building is closed, but our community is open. Thanks for being a part of our community.

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Throughout the past couple of weeks, and for the foreseeable future, many programs, events, and initiatives are being canceled, postponed, or, when possible, moved to the virtual space. It is hard to think of any aspect of our daily lives, any sector of the economy, any scheduled gathering that has *not* in some way been impacted by covid-19 and our response to it: the deadline for filing taxes has been extended; the MLB had "Opening Day at Home" where they shared 30 classic games, but not a single team took to the field; congregations and schools are gathering in virtual forums. And yet there is one thing that seems to have been somewhat unaffected, at least thus far: the 2020 Census.

The Constitution of the United States mandates that the federal government take a census of the residents of each state every ten years. The first census was taken in 1790 under Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, and found that there were 3,929,326 residents. Compare that to the most recent census of 2010 which counted 308,745,538 residents. The Census is critical for Americans, and the outcome of the count has an impact on our daily lives. There are

\$800 billion of federal funds that are distributed based on who is counted to support local schools and hospitals, critical institutions in our communities. If children are not counted, then schools will be underfunded, and we will imperil future generations. If entire households are not counted, then local hospitals may be overcrowded, and public health is put at risk. Representation in Congress is determined by the Census. If people are not counted, then our communities are not properly represented, and our voices will not be heard. Each one of us has not only a legal obligation to complete the census, but we also have an ethical and moral, perhaps even a religious obligation, to complete the census when it arrives at our door. Each one of us counts. The number is not trivial. The number matters. The details matter. Parshat Vayikra agrees. There is power in the details, and there is power in getting it right.

A cursory read of Parshat Vayikra would suggest that the text is about an ancient cultic practice of animal sacrifice, a medium of worship that is neither practiced nor palatable to the modern progressive Jew. But the book of Leviticus is the central text of the Torah, literally *and* figuratively. It is ultimately concerned with building and regulating the relationship between this world and the celestial world, between the Israelites and their God. Leviticus seeks to help us construct a life of holiness and spiritual connection by transforming the mundane into the sacred, the everyday into the holy.

The parsha begins with the laws of the *olah*, the burnt offering, which was entirely consumed by fire upon the altar. In instructing the individual who brings forth an offering, the Torah teaches, וְסָמַךְ יָדוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֹלָה, “He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering,” וְנִרְצָה לוֹ לְכַפֵּר עָלָיו, “that it may be acceptable in his behalf, in expiation for him” (Leviticus 1:4). *Smicha*, the laying of hands upon the sacrifice, is an essential component of the

ritual. When a person places their hands upon the animal, it becomes property of the Holy Blessed One. The physical act of touching the animal with one's very own hands communicates to all who witness this act that the animal is now intended for God.

But a small and seemingly insignificant detail remains unclear. The verse states: "He shall lay his hand, *yado*." However, all of the commentaries and later descriptions assume that the individual lays *both* of his hands on the animal! I know it sounds like an insignificant detail—one hand, two hands, who cares! But the details matter and our tradition teaches that there is power in getting it right. The answer to the question is based on a precise understanding of Hebrew grammar. (I know, another thrilling detail!) The Talmud, in tractate Menachot (93b), explores this issue. When the Torah teaches us about Aaron's performance of the sacrifices on Yom Kippur, it says that he shall place *both* hands on the animal. But the Hebrew word there for "hands" is written *yud-dalet-vav*. Without vowels, the word can be pronounced *yadav*, his hands (plural), or it can be pronounced *yado*, his hand (singular). Since the same verse says *shtei*, "both," one can infer that the proper pronunciation is the plural *yadav*. From here, the sage Reish Lakish establishes a principle that wherever the Torah says "hand" in the context of *smicha*, we are to understand it as referring to *both hands* in the plural.

One of Reish Lakish's colleagues, Rabbi Elazar, went to the study hall and shared this teaching with his students, but he did not attribute it to Reish Lakish and he omitted the specific context of the law—he left out the details! In so doing, he misled his students and Reish Lakish is infuriated when he finds out because the details matter. It matters that one needs to use both hands when doing *smicha* before offering a sacrifice. The details are important. There is power in doing it right.

The same can be said of the current situation with Covid-19. The details are important and there is life-saving power in getting it right. How we conduct ourselves during this period of physical distancing may literally be a matter of life and death. How the scientific and medical communities handle this crisis matters immensely. How our elected officials choose to lead and the actions that they do or do not take matter. There is power in the smallest of even seemingly insignificant details. Getting it right is essential because getting it right could mean saving a life.

And the same can be said about our approach to the Census. We could treat it as another chore, another ask being made of us during a time when we are already feeling burdened and overwhelmed. Or we can treat it as a sacred act, an obligation to our community members and to our neighbors that operates not only on a legal plane, but also on an ethical, moral, and religious plane. If we truly believe as Jews that each individual is created *btzelem Elokim*, in the image of the Divine, and is thus deserving of access to education and other essential services, then we are duty-bound to fulfill this obligation and assist others in doing so as well. If we truly believe as Jews that we have a responsibility to care for our community, then we are obligated to do everything in our power to make sure that everyone is counted and that we have access to the resources we deserve.

Most households will be given the opportunity to complete the 2020 Census online. Many of you have probably received a mailing or two by now with instructions about how to do it. All responses are secure and encrypted. Your data is safe, and your responses are not shared with other government agencies for any other purpose. If you cannot complete it online, you can do so over the phone and ultimately by mail. I fulfilled my obligation yesterday and it took me only six minutes to complete the online form for the three members of my household. I

implore each of you to do your part, to be counted, to demonstrate that the details are important, and that there is power in getting it right.

In a time like this, when we face a global pandemic and a period of great uncertainty, we have the opportunity to make our values very clear. We have seen how, in times of need, people stand up to help and make a real difference in the world. Even deeds of kindness that seem small can have a major impact. That is an important lesson of these weeks: that which is seemingly minor may contribute to something much more significant, much more meaningful than that lone or isolated event. Filling out the Census might not seem like a life-saving act, it may not feel like you are changing the future for a child, it may not appear to change whose voice is heard in the halls of Congress. However, getting the Census right, including everyone, counting every single person, has the power to do all of that and more. On this Census Sabbath, I charge you all to do your part by responding to the 2020 Census. There is power in the details, there is power in getting this right.