

The Strange Case of the Small Aleph

Introduction

This week's portion is *Vayikra*. *Vayikra* is not only the name of the weekly portion, but also the name of the entire book of Leviticus, the middle book in the Torah, which deals with sacrificial worship. It begins with:

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. [Leviticus 1:1]

What's so special about that? This: The final aleph of the word *Vayikra* is written smaller than normal on the Torah scroll. Why?

Background

The word *Vayikra* means “And He called”. God called Moses. If we removed the aleph entirely, the word would read *Vayikar*. It would mean “And he happened”, implying “by chance”.

In fact, *Vayikar* is the word used when God appears to the wicked Gentile prophet Bilaam:

וַיִּקְרַח אֱלֹהִים אֶל־בִּלְעָם

And God happened upon Bilaam. [Numbers 23:4]

Rashi comments, based on the Midrash: [Genesis Rabbah 52:5]

Vayikar is an expression ordinarily used to denote events of a casual character, an expression for something shameful, an expression for an unclean happening. It is as much as to say: with reluctance and in a contemptuous manner.

Explanations

-Humility. The Baal HaTurim (14th-century Spain) explains that the small aleph is a reflection of Moses' humility:

Moses was both great and humble, and wanted only to write *Vayikar*, signifying “chance”, as if the Holy One blessed be He appeared to him only in a dream, as was the case for Bilaam, suggesting that God appeared to him by mere chance.

However, God told Moses to write the word with an aleph. Moses then said to Him, because of his extreme humility, that he would only write an aleph that was smaller than the other alephs in the Torah, and he did indeed write it very small.

Why did God agree? Perhaps Moses convinced Him, as happened many times in the Torah.

In contrast, the aleph in Adam's name in the first word of the Book of Chronicles is written larger than normal:

אָדָם שֵׁת אֵנוֹשׁ -- Adam, Seth, Enosh. [1 Chron. 1:1]

This alludes to the fact that Adam was not humble, which accelerated his downfall. The Lubavitcher Rebbe comments:

Moses rectified Adam's mistake. He recognized his greatness but nevertheless remained humble. His humility was not self-delusional but the result of simple reasoning. He thought: "I cannot take any credit for any of my gifts or accomplishments since they are all God-given. Indeed, if another person had been given my potentials, he would have accomplished more and climbed greater heights than I have." *He understood that true humility does not mean denigrating oneself but seeing the virtue in others.*

We are all spiritual heirs of Adam and Moses. When we feel inadequate we must remember that we are Adam, with a big aleph. When thoughts of "Who am I?" deter us from our task, we must recall that we are Adam, formed by God's own hands, and fully capable of caring for His garden. At the same time, we must recall that we are Moses, and thereby ensure that our self-assurance does not develop into conceit.

Moreover, if we remember the small aleph, we, too, will merit to be called by God, and this revelation will provide us with the strength to answer God's call, drawing ourselves and the world at large closer to Him. This is the true essence of the sacrifices [in Leviticus], whose laws are introduced by the lesson of the small aleph.

[Likutei Sichot, v17, pp. 7-8]

Why make the aleph and not another letter small? Aleph is the first, the leader, number one. It is to teach us that the humility (smallness) must be in the same area as greatness (aleph).

-Reluctance of Moses to enter the Tabernacle until "called" by God.

Midrash:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, "Make a tabernacle." So he hurried up and made it. Then he stood alone outside, because he was afraid to enter the

tent of meeting... The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "It is not right for Moses, since he made the tabernacle, to stand outside while I stand inside; so look, I am calling upon him to enter." It is therefore written "Then [the Lord] called to Moses." [Midrash Tanchuma, Lev. 1:1]

-The small aleph calls attention to it. Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, from 19th-century Poland, argued that the smallness of the aleph calls attention to it and gives it prominence, to teach us the importance of humility.

-But isn't bigger letters the usual way to call attention? Reverse psychology?

-The small aleph alludes to children beginning their study of Torah with Leviticus. The Midrash notes:

Rabbi Assi said: Why do young children begin [their study of Torah] with Leviticus and not Genesis? Surely it is because young children are pure, and the sacrifices are pure; so let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure. [Lev. Rabbah 7:3; also Yalkut Shimoni, Tzav 479]

A "sacrifice" (קָרְבָּן – *korban*) literally means "that which brings you closer [to God]". The book teaches that Israel is *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* -- a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

-Nothing happens by chance. The word *vayikra* comes from the root word *kra*, meaning "to call", and is related to the word *mikreh*, meaning "chance". In the Torah, the curses God threatens us, with if we are not faithful to the Covenant, [Deut. 28: 15ff] include the word *keri* seven times. Maimonides concludes from this:

It is a positive commandment from the Torah to cry out and blow trumpets [Numbers 10:9] ... when trouble strikes the community... And this is the way of repentance. For when trouble comes, and they yell out, ... everyone will know that it was because of their evil deeds that this was done to them. If, however, the people do not cry out in prayer... but merely say that it is the way of the world for such a thing to happen to them, and that their trouble is a matter of pure chance, they have chosen a cruel path which will cause them to continue in their bad deeds, and thus bring additional troubles on them. It is written in the Torah:

If you continue to be *keri* [hostile] towards Me, then in My anger I will be *keri* [hostile] towards you. [Leviticus 26: 27-28]

This means: If, when I bring trouble upon you to make you repent, you say that the trouble is purely accidental, then I will add arbitrariness to your trouble. [I will not limit it or defend you.] [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Fasts 1:1-3]

So, for Maimonides, the curses are not *direct* punishment from God. God will just withdraw His protection. Israel will have to fend for itself. The

message is: If you accept God, God will be with you; if you think events happen by chance, then God will indeed leave them to chance.

-There is meaning and purpose. In this vein, some note that aleph is the only thing that stands between *vayikra* and *vayikar*, purpose and accident. Aleph is the first letter; it represents the number one, One God. When the aleph is there, we see meaning and purpose in life. When it's absent, everything in life is merely an accident and has no special meaning or message.

-Can we add: "When the aleph is small, in between there and not there, it teaches that some events are purposeful and others accidental, per the laws of quantum mechanics."?

-God's presence will be less obvious. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sees the small aleph as a hint that, from that point on, God's presence will not always be as clear as during the Exodus:

The letter aleph... is almost invisible. Do not expect... that the presence of God in history will always be as clear and unambiguous as it was during the Exodus... For much of the time it will depend on your own sensitivity. For those who look, it will be visible. For those who listen, it can be heard. But first you have to look and listen. If you choose not to see or hear, then Vayikra will become Vayikar. The call will be inaudible.

-It's a scribal error. Some argue this may be just a scribal error. The Shadal, from 19th-century Italy, notes that when a word begins with the same letter as the word before it ended, such as our "וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה", the scribal practice used to be to delete one of them and perhaps include a symbol to indicate that one letter was standing in for two. Later, they discontinued this practice and added in the repeated letter, but if there was little space they wrote it smaller. [Shadal on Gen. 27:46]

This is unlikely because there are 28 places in Tanach (of which 9 in Torah) with a letter written extra-small, and most of the time that letter is not the same as an adjacent letter.

Spelling anomalies are common in Bible

There are many other spelling anomalies in Tanach, and tradition has explanations for all of them:

-As mentioned, there are 28 places in Tanach (of which 9 in Torah) with a letter written extra-small.

-There are 37 places in Tanach (of which 20 in Torah) with a letter written extra-large. Example:

The last letters of the first and last words of the Shema are oversized:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Reason: These two letters make up the word עד, “witness,” because we are testifying to God's oneness.

-There are 4 letters that are suspended or elevated. Example:

בֶּן־מְנַשֶּׁה – “Ben Menashe” vs “Ben Moshe”. [Judges 18:30]

Reason: To hide the fact that Moses’ son lapsed into idolatry.

-There are 53 letters with extra dots on top of them. Example:

לָנוּ וְלִבְנֵינוּ – “for us and our children”. [Deut 29:28]

-Decorative “crowns” are sometimes placed on the letters. They have kabalistic explanations.

-There is a broken vav in the word “shalom” in Numbers 25:12:

שְׁלֹמֹם

God promises peace after Pinchas has killed two sinners – but peace after killing is not whole.

Conclusion

The traditional scrolls have many letters written in unusual ways. Our commentators teach us deep reasons for every one of these occurrences.

Shabbat shalom.