

## THE SIDRA VAYIKRA

*May I first congratulate the congregation on its appointment of a new Rav. May it prove to be a perfect shidduch, and may Rabbi Dov and Rabbanit Freda Kaplan achieve that ideal state of metzi'at chein v'sechel tov b'einei Elokim v'adam, being blessed to constitute a source of spiritual inspiration and social dynamism.*

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*Vayyikra el Mosheh*, 'And God called to Moses.' What, we might ask, was Moses' state of mind when, with the passing of time, the divine communications grew more and more frequent? Did he become blasé, as we might expect, especially after spending 40 days in company with the divine? With the lightest of touches, our rabbinical masorettes, who determined the masorah, the authorised version of our transmitted Torah text, answered this question, by means of a visual marker in the Torah. This takes the form of an instruction that the letter *alif* at the end of the first word, *Vayyikra*, of today's Sidra, be written in miniature, as you will have noticed in your chumashim.

The letter *alif* - the very first letter of the alphabet - signifies, and, indeed, has the numerical value, of one, denoting the self, the ego, the one we instinctively put first in almost every situation. The word *aluf* in Hebrew also means "the most exalted one", as in the phrase *alufei Edom*, translated in some Bibles as "the dukes of Edom." In Modern Hebrew *Aluf* means a champion, the number one.

Now, at the point when God called to Moses - *Vayikra* - in today's sidra, Moses had every reason to be filled with justifiable pride at having essentially completed his mission. He had delivered his people from slavery, brought down a Torah from Sinai, appointed a judiciary to administer God's law and overseen the building and furnishing of a *Mishkan*, a habitation for God among men. He had also received so many "calls" from, and audiences with, God, that one would have thought that this might have injected within him a justifiable sense of spiritual elevation and self-importance.

But this is precisely the point being made by that miniature *Alif*. Never once did Moses look back on his life and ministry and reflect on how successful he had been. He never saw himself as anything other than the servant of God, carrying out His mission, initiating nothing, and achieving nothing, independently of God.

This tendency to self-deprecation remained throughout his ministry, exactly as on that very first occasion, at the burning bush, when he had responded instinctively, *Miy anokhi*, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" - "What sort of powers of persuasion, diplomacy or leadership do I possess, that I might succeed in this

fateful and dangerous mission? I am, after all, only a miniature *alif*, with painfully limited self-worth.

Notwithstanding his unique relationship with God, or his achievements to date, when God calls to Moses, in today's sidrah, for the umpteenth time, he never lost that sense of humility, of awe and reverence before the voice and command of the great God, or his sense of wonder and privilege that he continued to be God's choice of religious and national leader.

Friends, that message, of the *alif ze'irah*, Moses' contracted ego, is a paradigm for the privilege of leadership not just of the Jewish community, but also within society at large. They say that power corrupts; for the temptation of leadership and the trapping of honour and influence that go with it, are generally too seductive for other than the totally incorruptible to handle. And the totally incorruptible generally flee from politics as from the plague.

They say that there are two kinds of leaders: those that are interested in the fleece and those that are interested in the flock. Most leaders, alas, belong to the former category, and it is as a reaction to that, that the masses in the Middle East are now in revolt.

In every sphere of leadership - national, international, religious or communal – we have almost come to expect sleaze or serious abuse of power, resulting in what Dominic Lawson refers to as “the death of deference,” namely, the total lack of respect for any authority. Those who once enjoyed authority and prestige in society – monarchs, Prime Ministers, Presidents, parliamentarians, the police, teachers, clergymen, and so on, - are all perceived as having feet of clay, and as capable of exploiting their offices for sexual favours or financial or other advantage. The young no longer have any role models, and their confidence is shaken to its foundation by the realisation that ethics and morality have now become obsolete and that, if they are not equally as astute and “street-wise,” they are likely to be exploited at every turn.

Few now believe in altruism, that anyone can have an authentic “calling,” a selfless desire to serve fellow man and ennoble society. Everyone is under suspicion. Use and abuse of power have become synonymous in the popular imagination. The *Alif ze'irah*, the self-contraction of a person's ego, is now perceived as a negative trait. Humility - once a highly-prized and widely promoted Jewish quality - has become equated with weakness and immaturity. The message of the first word in today's sidra is so desperately needed in today's world, with its call for leaders to put their own selfish pursuits aside and to aspire to the highest moral and ethical standards.

That small *Alif* also calls out to those who sense that they possess the qualities to lead and contribute toward the welfare of the community, but who are deterred by the fact that it will involve them in a sacrifice of their free time and leisure pursuits. It calls for them to sublimate a little of their *alif*, their instinctive number one priority, and, like Moses, to make themselves a conduit and receptor for the highest and most noble imperatives.

Friends, I can't remember the last time – if ever - I have singled out any individual within the community as a paragon of selflessness, but I wish to do so today in the context of a brief account of a visit Gloria and I made in January to the King David School in Manchester. I knew that school well, as I was its first full-time Director of Jewish Studies from 1968-71. In those days, and until quite recently, it was more than just an under-performing school. It was recognised as the place to which only those unable to get into one of the really good schools applied. No wonder it lost faith in itself, and was on the verge of closing.

At that point there stepped in a man of unique vision, and passionate commitment to the community and to Jewish education in particular. His name is Joshua Rowe. A very successful businessman, he used to go out canvassing for UJIA. His experience one night changed his life's direction. He called on a very wealthy man and attempted to persuade him to support that cause. The man refused point blank. When pressed, he said, 'Israel is of no interest to me'. When Joshua asked him what exactly did interest him, he replied, 'the golf club.' It was at that point that it dawned on Joshua that if that was the extent of Jewish identity among the wider, middle of the road, Jewish community, then it was doomed to extinction before very long. That if religious pride and sense of mission and unity was to be the exclusive preserve of the right wing and charedim then Judaism was going to become transformed into a fringe faith, detached from modern cultural life and divested of its mission to be a light unto the nations.

And he was not prepared to stand idly by and allow that to happen. To cut a long story short, he has turned around that school to become the pride of the community. He secured a 22 million pound grant from the government and proudly showed us around his state-of-the-art campus. I say 'his' campus, because he, supported actively by his wife, has been the primary force, the visionary, the promoter and the enabler of that entire venture. He also opened a Yavneh school on the campus for parents who want their children to have a more intense Torah education, leading to yeshivah and Sem, but who also want a high secular standard and a positive Zionist identity.

Gloria and I were in awe as we learned that this extremely busy international business man was not merely the Chair of Governors, but that he had an office in the school, and spent a minimum of two hours each day there. As we walked

along the corridors, he addressed every pupil, teacher, lab. technician or dinner lady that we passed by their names. And they all greeted him with broad smiles. This is now the school that parents fight to get their pupils into. It is the school that our own granddaughter has moved to after two years in the prestigious Manchester High School, because she wants to study in a warm, dynamic and inspirational Jewish environment wherein the highest academic standards are equally pursued and achieved.

Friends, that is an example of an *alif ze'irah*, of a giant of a man who sacrifices so much of his own money, his business and leisure time, in order to change the Modern Orthodox landscape in a North Manchester that was growing more and more polarised.

I know that there are many people, in this community in particular, who are similarly at the helm of the community and its religious, representative and welfare institutions. I recall, with a sense of privilege, having worked with the late Stanley Frankfurt, of blessed memory, who had the same sense of mission with regard to the creation of Kerem School. There is, of course, the philanthropist Benjamin Pearl who is similarly motivated in the cause of Jewish education and the establishment of new schools. But I dwelt at length on the contribution of Joshua Rowe because I was particularly inspired by the fact that he doesn't content himself with merely raising the funds, but, together with his wife, is a hands-on, daily worker, together with the Limmudei Kodesh staff, in the cause of raising the standards of learning and Orthodox practice. I instinctively think of him when I contemplate that textual device, of the miniature *alif*, that serves to remind us of those two vital qualities, humility and hands-on dedication, both *sine qua non* for the establishment of any great and enduring enterprise.

*Vechol mi she'oskin betzorchei tzibbut be'emunah*, 'And as for all those who serve our community in faithfulness - *Ha-Kadosh Baruch hu yeshaleim sekham* - May the Almighty grant them the fulfilment of all their endeavours'. Amen.

The message is contained in another meaning of the word *alif*. Its verb-form, *l'alef*, means "to learn" or "teach" - depending on the conjugation - from which we get the Israeli institution of *Ulpan*, "learning centre." One of the essential preconditions for progress in learning is the *Alif ze'irah*, making your own *alif*, your "self" - your opinion of your own knowledge - small. If you think you know it all, you will never progress. And your pre-Pesach Barmitzvah underscores that message; for Pesach is the festival when the young people are encouraged to ask questions. It is significant that their questions - in the form of the *Mah Nishtanah* - are far more clearly stated than the answers. Given to them. In fact you will have problems identifying the answers to those four questions in the *Avadim Hayyinu* composition that follows.

The fact that they are curious and ask questions is far more important than whether or not we, the parents, can adequately provide them with satisfactory answers. The truth is, that there are few certainties in life; many things remain problematic. And each person or generation provides different answers to those weighty questions. Asking unanswered questions leaves man in a state of constant search for truth.

You will find that the answer to the young person's four questions is delayed for an hour or so, until we reach the Rabban Gamliel passage where Pesach, Matza and Maror are properly explained. This symbolises to my mind the fact that answers to life's questions are often a long time in coming; that the best answers are those that we ourselves can suggest; and that, once we give up questioning and pursuing knowledge, the answers will never ever come.

So boys, remember the *Alif ze'irah*, and regard your own minds as small before the greatness of Judaism's sages and teachers. Never give up asking your questions, and searching and researching for the answers. Take full advantage of the excellent Jewish schools that you both attend, and grow up to be proud and learned Jews who will one day rise to the challenge of Jewish leadership that I held out to the community, and who will be prepared to sacrifice your own *alif*, the free time available to you for yourself, in order to enrich your community.

Indeed, in proportion to the extent to which you sacrifice your own *alifs*, your own selfish interests, your honour and glory will increase. Would you like me to demonstrate that to you? Yes?

Well, just look what you are left with when you totally submerge your own *alif*? [Cover up *alif*, and show rest of word *Viykar* to boys and cong.] - You are left with the word *viykar*, which means "and glory," as it says in the Scroll of Esther, *Layehudim hayta orah v'simcha v'sason VIYKAR* - "And the Jews had light and joy, gladness and glory."

That *viykar* can be yours if you accept this challenge. It will ensure that you will grow up to be a credit to your dear parents, grandparents and family, to your community and your people. Amen.