



“ויקרא אל משה” Is Written with a Small “Aleph” The Midrash Says: “Were it not for the young children learning the details of the korbanos the world would not endure”

On the upcoming, auspicious Shabbas Kodesh, we will read the Torah portion of Vayikra. Thus, we begin reading the Torah portions of the third sefer of the Torah. In the very first word of sefer Vayikra, we find something fascinating; according to tradition, the letter “aleph” of “ויקרא” is written with a little “aleph.”

It is fitting, therefore, that we introduce the sacred words of the great Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen of Tzefat, ztz”l, a disciple of the Arizal. In his sefer Sifsei Kohen, he discusses the significance of the small “aleph”: **The “aleph” of Vayikra is a small “aleph,” alluding to the practice of starting to teach young children Torah with sefer Vayikra, the sefer of the korbanos. Once, the world existed in the merit of the korbanos. Now, however, that there are no korbanos, it exists on account of the utterances of the small children learning with their teachers. Those utterances are considered like the offering of the korbanos, as it states in the Midrash: Let pure ones come and occupy themselves with things that are pure.**

It is apparent that he is referring to the teaching in the Gemara (Shabbas 119b): **“אמר ריש לקיש משום רבי יהודה נשיאה, אין העולם מתקיים אלא בשביל הבל תינוקות של בית רבן, אמר ליה רב פפא לאבבי דידי ודידך מאי. אמר ליה אינו דומה הבל שיש בו חטא להבל שאין בו חטא.”** **Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehudah Nesiah: The world continues to exist only in the merit of the breath of schoolchildren. Rav Pappa said to Abayei:**

My breath and your breath, what of them? (Do they not count for anything?) He (Abayei) said to him: Breath that contains the taint of sin cannot be compared to breath that does not contain the taint of sin.

Notwithstanding, the subject deserves further exploration. Accepting that the continued existence of the world hinges on the Torah utterances of young schoolchildren, but why do we begin teaching them Torah specifically with sefer Vayikra, the sefer of the korbanos? And even if we wish to fulfill the notion of: **Let pure ones come and occupy themselves with things that are pure**—in reality, the entire Torah is pure. In fact, David HaMelech lists this as one of the attributes of the Torah (Tehillim 19, 10): **“יראת ה’ טהורה עומדת לעד”**—**the fear of Hashem is pure, enduring forever.**

The Source for This Notion Is Found in the Midrash

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by examining the words of Chazal in the Midrash Tanchuma. This is the source for the practice of beginning to teach schoolchildren Torah with sefer Vayikra. Not only does the world endure in the merit of their Torah utterances, but without them, the world would cease to exist. Here is the passage from the Midrash Tanchuma: (Tzav 14):

Rabbi Assia said, “Why do the young schoolchildren studying with their masters begin by studying the sefer

Vayikra? Rather, it is because all the korbanos are written in it; and because they are pure until now and are not familiar with the taste of sin and iniquity. Hence, HKB”H said, ‘Let them begin first with the order of the korbanos, so that pure ones will come and occupy themselves with the acts of purity. Therefore, I view them, as if they were standing and offering korbanos before Me.’ And He is informing you that even though the Beis HaMikdash is destroyed and korbanos are not practiced, were it not for the young children reading the order of the korbanos, the world would not remain in existence.”

Nevertheless, the Midrash goes on to say that although the world continues to exist primarily on account of the schoolchildren studying with their teachers, in actuality, the Torah-study of every Jew is significant and beneficial:

Therefore, HKB”H said to Yisrael, “My children, even though the Beis HaMikdash is destroyed, and the korbanos have been abolished, and the ‘korban olah’ is not practiced, if you occupy yourselves and read the passage of the ‘olah’ and study the passage of the korbanos, I count it for you as if you are offering a ‘korban olah’ before Me, as it is stated (Vayikra 6, 2), ‘This is the Torah of an olah.’” In other words, one who occupies himself with the Torah of the “olah” merits life in the Olam HaBa.

Notwithstanding, the words of the Midrash deserve further clarification. Since the Midrash concludes by saying that every Jew can offer korbanos by reading and studying the passages of the korbanos, why is it necessary to teach young schoolchildren embarking on their study of Torah sefer Vayikra? Why is it essential that it be considered as if they actually offered a korban? Even more perplexing is the fact that young schoolchildren studying with their teachers and Rabbis are pure and without sin; hence, they don’t require the atonement afforded by korbanos. So, why is it necessary for them to study the order of the korbanos so much so that the continued existence of the world depends on it?

The Torah Study of Schoolchildren Releases Them from the Obligation Placed upon Them at Matan Torah

I had a wonderful thought concerning this matter! Chazal state that at the time of Matan Torah, HKB”H requested that

Yisrael designate a group to be held responsible for upholding the precepts of the Torah. They offered Him the young children studying with their masters. And if, chas v’shalom, Yisrael fail to uphold the precepts of the Torah, the children will be punished in their place, G-d help us! Here is the pertinent passage in the Midrash Rabbah (Shir HaShirim 1, 23) related to the passuk (Shir HaShirim 1, 4):

“Draw me near, we will run after You.” Rabbi Meir said: When Yisrael stood before Har Sinai to receive the Torah, HKB”H said to them, “What? Am I supposed to give you the Torah without any security? Bring Me some good (reliable) guarantors that you will observe her properly, and I will give her to you.” . . . They said, “Our Avos are our guarantors.” HKB”H said to them, “I have issues with your Avos. I can find fault with Avraham for inquiring (Bereishis 15, 8): ‘How will I know (that I will inherit it)? With Yitzchak, I can find fault, because he loved Eisav, and I hated him, as it states (Malachi 1, 3): ‘But Eisav, I hated him.’ With Yaakov (thinking I mistreated him) who said (Yeshayah 40, 27): ‘My path was hidden from Hashem.’ Rather, bring me reliable guarantors, and I will give her to them . . .”

They said, “But our children will be our guarantors.” HKB”H said, “They are certainly good guarantors. On their account, I will give her to you.” That is the meaning of that which is written (Tehillim 8, 3): “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, You have established strength.” There is no strength other than Torah, as it states (ibid. 29, 11): “Hashem will give might to his nation.” When the borrower is demanded to pay, and he does not have with what to pay, who is taken? Is it not the guarantor? That is the implication of that which is stated (Hoshea 4, 6): “And as you have forgotten the Torah of your G-d, I, too, will forget your children.” Rav Acha said: I, too, as it were, I, too, am forgetful. Who will say words of Torah before saying “Bless Hashem, the blessed One”? . . . Therefore, a person must introduce his child to Torah and teach him to study, so that he will live a long life in this world.

We can now begin to appreciate HKB”H’s incredible mercy and kindness; He provided the remedy ahead of the ailment to spare the young schoolchildren of Yisrael; so that they would not have to be victims as the guarantors for their parents’ iniquities. This is accomplished by initiating them into Torah-

study with sefer Vayikra, the book of the korbanos. To better comprehend the matter, let us refer to the commentary of the Ramban on this week's parsha (Vayikra 1, 10). He explains magnificently how a korban atones for a sinner. Rabeinu Bachayei, the Recanati and most of the Rishonim concur with him. Here is his explanation:

A person's actions result from a combination of thought, speech and deed. Hence, when he commits an act of transgression, G-d commands him to follow a protocol accounting for each of these components. Bringing the korban and leaning on it with his hands corresponds to the deed. Verbally confessing corresponds to the speech. Burning the various organs in the fire corresponds to the thought . . . The blood is sprinkled on the mizbeich representing his life-force. By following this protocol, a person should have in mind that he sinned to his G-d with his body and soul; therefore, it is only fitting that his blood should be spilled and his physical body should be incinerated. It is only by the grace and benevolence of the Creator that a substitute was accepted in his place— atoning for the acts of his blood, soul and limbs.

Thus, when young schoolchildren studying with their Rabbis begin learning the protocols of the korbanos, HKB"H views it as if they offered themselves to Him. He, in His infinite mercy, however, accepts the korban in their stead, in keeping with the principle: **"Anyone who studies the Torah of the 'chatas,' it is as if he offered a 'chatas.'"** In this manner, they are released from their obligation as guarantors and are able to live long lives.

This explains the conclusion of the Midrash very nicely: **"If not for the young children reading the order of the korbanos, the world would not exist."** For, otherwise, they would be the sacrifices, chas v'shalom, paying with their lives as their parents' guarantors. Then, the world could not continue to exist, as we learned from Rabbi Yehudah Nesiah: **The world continues to exist only in the merit of the breath of schoolchildren.** However, by studying the protocols of the korbanos, and having it considered by HKB"H as if they themselves were sacrificed as korbanos, they are released from their obligations as guarantors. As a result, they are able to live long lives and study Torah with breath that is untainted by sin that sustains the world.

At this point, we can also appreciate why the Midrash adds afterwards that every Jew must study the laws and protocols of the korbanos in the Torah, so that it is considered as if they actually offered a korban. For, the utterances of the schoolchildren related to the korbanos releases them from their obligation, but that means that the parents themselves still need to atone for their sins. Therefore, the Midrash concludes by saying that the parents and adults must also study the protocols of the korbanos; thus, they will be afforded atonement.

The Amazing Connection between the Small Aleph and the Two Keruvim that Resemble Young Children

It now gives me great pleasure to present to our royal audience an explanation from the holy Admor, Rabbi Aharon of Belz, zy"a, explaining the connection between the small **"aleph"** in the word **"ויקרא"** and the continuation of the passuk: **"ויקרא אל משה וידבר ה' אליו מאהל מועד לאמר"**. He refers to an explanation from his father, the holy Admor, Rabbi Yischar Dov of Belz, zy"a, related to the passuk in parshas Terumah concerning the two keruvim that stood atop the Aron (Shemos 25, 18):

"You shall make two keruvim of gold . . . The keruvim shall be with wings spread upward . . . You shall place the lid (Kaporet) of the Aron from above, and into the Aron you shall put the Testimony that I shall give you. It is there that I shall arrange audience with you, and I shall speak with you from atop the lid, from between the two keruvim that are on the Aron of the Testimony, and it is all that I shall command you pertaining to Bnei Yisrael. Rashi comments: **"Keruvim"—they each had the image of a child's face.** The source for this comment is found in the Gemara (Succah 5b): **מאי כרוב, אמר רבי אבהו כרביא, שכן בבבל קורין "לינוקא רביא"—what is a "keruv"? Rabbi Abahu said: It is "like a child." For indeed in Bavel, they call a child "ravva."**

He explains in his sacred words that this design teaches us a valuable lesson concerning the education of our children that is the vital foundation of the eternal survival of the congregation of Yisrael. The Aron itself housed the two luchos of the covenant—the source of the entire Torah. However, the Torah only endures when the two keruvim resembling two

schoolchildren under the tutelage of their Rabbis are attached to the Aron of the covenant; they must be trained to engage in Torah-study. For this reason, HKB”H chose to communicate to Moshe all the commands to be transmitted to Yisrael with a voice emanating from between the two keruvim. This symbolized that the dwelling of the Shechinah depends on the Torah-study of the young schoolchildren.

This then is the interpretation of the passuk: **וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה**. The miniature **“aleph”** alludes to the Torah-study of the young schoolchildren under the tutelage of their Rabbis—utterances of Torah untainted by sin. To emphasize the importance of their Torah-study to HKB”H, the passuk continues: **“Hashem spoke to him from Ohel Mo’ed, saying.”** Here Rashi comments: **One might posit that the voice came from the entire House (the Mishkan). Hence, the Torah specifies: “From above the lid (Kaporet).” One might posit that the voice came from the entire lid. Hence, the Torah specifies: “From between the two keruvim.”** Thus, we see that HKB”H chose to rest His Shechinah between the two keruvim in the merit of the Torah-study of the young schoolchildren under the tutelage of their Rabbis. This concludes his sacred insight.

The Consummation of the Mitzvah of Torah Study Is Studying with One’s Children

As a loyal servant in the presence of his masters, it appears that we can embellish their sacred insight. The passuk says: **“The keruvim shall be with wings spread upward.”** As explained, the keruvim were fashioned in the image of children. Do children have wings? So, what is the significance and symbolism of the wings spread upward?

We will explain the matter based on a wonderful chiddush from the holy Admor, Rabbi Yischar Dov of Belz, zy”a. If we examine the teachings of the Rambam closely, we find that he counts an individual’s personal mitzvah of learning Torah and the mitzvah of learning Torah with one’s children as a single mitzvah. He writes in Sefer HaMitzvos: **The 11th mitzvah is that we are commanded to study and to teach the wisdom of Torah. This is called Talmud Torah. The source of this commandment is G-d’s statement, “Teach them to your children.”** Rabbi Yischar Dov explains that thus HKB”H teaches us that even if a person studies Torah diligently day

and night, but he neglects to also study Torah with his children, in essence, he has only performed half of the mitzvah.

Now, the Tikunei Zohar states (Tikun 10): **“אורייתא בלא דחילו—Torah without reverence and love does not ascend upwards.** It teaches us that Torah study requires fear and love—“yirah” and “ahavah”; they function as two wings that carry the Torah we study upwards. Thus, it is evident that if a person only fulfills half the mitzvah by only studying himself but not teaching it to his children, his Torah remains down below until he completes the mitzvah by also teaching it to his children.

We can now comprehend the implication of the passuk: **“The keruvim shall be with wings spread upward.”** The keruvim which were fastened to the Aron symbolize the schoolchildren who study the Torah and cherish it. They spread their wings upwards to elevate their parents’ Torah upwards to the heavens. For, as explained, to fulfill the mitzvah of Torah-study completely—symbolized by the Aron—the children—the keruvim—must also be involved in Torah-study.

The Berachah Recited over the Torah Includes a Tefilah for the Children’s Torah Study

Based on this amazing principle that we learned from the sacred teachings of the holy Maharid, zy”a, we can begin to comprehend the formula of the berachah recited over the Torah instituted by Chazal: **“אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה—Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to engage in words of Torah.**

Immediately after reciting this berachah, we add a special tefilah pertaining to the pleasure we and our offspring derive from the study of Torah: **“והערב נא ה' אלקינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ובפיות עמך בית ישראל, ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאינו וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל, כולנו יודעי שמך ולומדי תורתך לשמה, ברוך אתה ה' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל.”** Please, Hashem, our G-d, sweeten the words of **Your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Yisrael. So that we, our descendants and the descendants of Your people, the house of Yisrael, all know Your name and study Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people, Yisrael.** What prompted them to insert this special tefilah pertaining to the children in the berachah of the Torah.

In truth, according to the explanation of the Maharid, zy”a, it makes perfect sense. Seeing as it is imperative to teach the children, as well, in order to perform the mitzvah of learning Torah fully, therefore they instituted a tefilah related to the successful Torah-study of the children within the formula of the berachah of the Torah. This emphasizes the fact that we do not intend to merely study Torah ourselves—which would only constitute a partial mitzvah—but we also intend to teach our children Torah—thereby performing the full mitzvah.

This explains very nicely the concluding berachah of this tefilah: **“ברוך אתה ה' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל”—blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people Yisrael.** In the Tur (O.C. 115), Rabeinu Yaakov, the Ba'al HaTurim, explains why Chazal describe HKB”H in two places in Shemoneh Esrei as **“אבינו”—our Father.** The first is in the berachah: **“השיבנו אבינו”—bring us back our Father to Your Torah;** the second is in the berachah: **“סלח לנו אבינו כי חטאנו”—forgive us our Father, for we have sinned.** Here are his sacred words:

The reason they instituted reciting the term “our Father” in the Berachos of “Bring us back” and “Forgive us,” which is not the case in any of the other Berachos, is because we are reminding Him that a father is obligated to teach his son. Hence, we say: “Bring us back our Father to Your Torah” and “Forgive us,” because of that which is written (Yeshayah 55, 7): “Let him return to Hashem, and He will show him mercy; to our G-d, for He is abundantly forgiving.” (This passuk points out that HKB”H forgives and pardons iniquity with the midah of “rachamim”—divine mercy.) **Therefore, we invoke the mercy of a father (Tehillim 103, 13): “As a father is merciful toward his children”; so that He will be merciful toward us and forgive us.**

This teaches us the proper kavanah every Jew should have—and in particular, those who study Torah—thrice daily when they recite these two Berachos in Shemoneh Esrei. When we recite the berachah: **“השיבנו אבינו לתורתך”**, we our beseeching **“our Father”** to fulfill His parental duties and teach us Torah. In fact, we can add a tantalizing thought based on a teaching in the Yerushalmi (R.H. 7a): **“בנוהג שבעולם מלך בשר ודם גוזר גזירה, רצה מקיימה, רצה אחרים מקיימים אותה, אבל הקב"ה אינו כן אלא גוזר גזירה ומקיימה תחילה, מאי טעמא (ויקרא כב-ט) ושמרו את משמרתיה”**. HKB”H Himself, **אני ה', אני הוא ששמרתיה מצוותיה של תורה תחילה”**,

so to speak, observes all the mitzvos of the Torah. This is in stark contrast to human kings; they are capricious; they may or may not comply with their own edicts. Not so HKB”H; He observes His own edicts before requiring others to do so.

Now, we have learned in the Gemara (Kiddushin 29a) that a father is obliged to teach his son Torah. The Gemara (ibid. 29b) derives this fact from the passuk (Devarim 11, 19): **“ולמדתם אותם”—you shall teach them to your children.** Seeing as HKB”H observes all of the precepts of the Torah, He is obliged to teach His children Torah. This coincides very nicely with the explanation of the Taz (O.C. 47, 5) apropos the formula of the berachah: **“ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה”—Blessed are You Hashem, the Giver of the Torah.** The berachah specifically employs the term **“נותן”** in the present tense rather than the past tense **“נתן”**. The Taz explains that this is **because the Almighty gives us His Torah constantly, on a daily basis. That is, we study it and He, the Blessed One, provides us with novel interpretations.** Thus, we see that HKB”H fulfills the mitzvah of teaching His children Torah.

We have now explained satisfactorily why they instituted a tefilah in the middle of the berachah of the Torah for our children to succeed in Torah-study. We are expressing our desire to fulfill the mitzvah completely—to study Torah ourselves and to also study Torah with our children. For this reason, we conclude the berachah: **“Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people Yisrael,”** since HKB”H is our Father, and He, too, fulfills the mitzvah of teaching His children, Yisrael, Torah. Therefore, it is our desire to follow His example and to also study Torah with our children and grandchildren to perform the mitzvah fully and ideally.

“And he will turn back the hearts of fathers with their sons”

It gives me great pleasure and delight to conclude this essay with the stirring words of the navi (Malachi 3, 23): **“הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא לפני בוא יום ה' הגדול והנורא, והשיב לב אבות על בנים ולב בנים על אבותם.”** **Behold, I send you Eliyahu HaNavi before the coming of the great and awesome day of Hashem. And he will turn back the hearts of fathers with their sons and the hearts of sons with their fathers.”** The Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Tetzaveh) states in the name of

the Zohar Chadash (Bereishis 12b) that the future geulah will come in the merit of Torah-study. Based on this premise, he writes: **This is the reason for the lengthy galus; so long as Yisrael do not occupy themselves with Torah and mitzvos, Moshe is unwilling to redeem a people who are remiss in Torah study.**

Now, we have already introduced the Gemara’s statement: **“The world continues to exist only in the merit of the breath of schoolchildren,”** because their utterances are untainted by sin. Nevertheless, the Torah-study of adults possesses an advantage that is lacking in the Torah-study of young schoolchildren. As per the Zohar hakadosh cited above: **Torah without reverence and love does not ascend upward.** Most certainly, young schoolchildren do not yet have the capacity to study Torah with loving devotion and reverence.

We can suggest that it is for this reason that the Torah included a father’s mitzvah of Torah-study with the mitzvah to study Torah with his children in a single mitzvah. It is

meant to teach us that the mitzvah of Torah-study is only performed properly and fully when a father also learns Torah with his children. Only then are both aspects and desired qualities of Torah-study present—the reverence and loving devotion of the father and the utterances untainted by sin of the children.

This then is the interpretation of the words of the navi: **“Behold, I send you Eliyahu HaNavi before the coming of the great and awesome day of Hashem. And he will turn back the hearts of fathers with their sons and the hearts of sons with their fathers.”** He will take the beneficial quality of the father’s Torah-study—reverence and loving devotion—and inculcate it in our children. Additionally: **“And the hearts of sons with their fathers.”** He will take the admirable quality of the children studying Torah—utterances untainted by sin—and impress it upon their fathers, that they, too, should merit studying Torah with this quality. Surely, in this merit, we will be privileged to witness the complete geulah, swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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