

Parashat Vayikra 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

There are probably times when we have all tried to avoid or wished we could avoid certain people, places, or situations. It may be avoidance that comes of awkwardness or a feeling that the encounter will not be time well spent, that there will not be much to gain by putting in the time and effort called for if we engage. We may also have each been blessed at one time or another when avoidance was not possible, and a great gift came from that encounter we preferred at the outset not to have. It is much easier to engage with people and contexts that are obviously exciting and so full of opportunities from which we know we will learn and derive pleasure. The challenge is to be open to all the encounters that life brings, not to skip pages, but to engage and be open to all the opportunities for growth and enrichment that come in unexpected ways. It is good to think about what we have learned from people and places we might have avoided, and of opportunities we might have missed without even knowing what we had lost.

I find myself thinking about what we learn from unexpected places as we enter the third book of the Torah this week, *Sefer Vayikra*, through the portal of its first portion, *Parashat Vayikra*. The Book of *Vayikra* is one that people would often prefer to avoid, not to engage with. Around our Thursday morning learning table at JP Licks, one of our number spoke of how boring *Vayikra* had been in school in Israel. It is so filled with the blood and gore details of the sacrificial service. In fact, the rabbis refer to *Vayikra* as *Torat Kohanim/the Guide for the Kohanim*. It is so much easier to engage with and be drawn into the lush narrative of *B'reishit/Genesis*, for instance, from the grandeur of creation, the emergence of humanity, the struggle of families striving to be whole. We have just come from *Sefer Sh'mot/Exodus*, the second book, birthed into freedom, at the start of a great journey home, and now this pause, letting go of the narrative thread, or so it seems.

The entire Torah is eternal, not meant to be read simply as history. It is about us, and so its third book must be as well. There is something exciting in its challenge to enter, to probe. The Torah speaks of us as *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh/a nation of priests and a holy people*. As a guide for the *kohanim*, it is directed to us too. There are times when the message is clear in this book, as when we are told, *K'doshim ti'hi'yu/you shall be holy, as I God your God am holy*. We are given practical laws to guide us in the way of justice. The rabbis offer a major teaching on the pursuit of peace in relation to the peace offering. Human behavior and the way that we carry ourselves in the sanctuary of God's world becomes the subtext of this book that seems so foreign on the surface, so easily avoided if we are not careful. In this first portion of the book, *Parashat Vayikra*, a framework is set to insure transparency on the part of leaders, a sin offering to be made by the king, the judges, the priests, no less than the common people, all to proclaim when they have erred and brought harm to another, restitution and renewal beginning with public acknowledgement. We learn that sins against people are sins against God, a timeless truth. How can we speak God's name while doing harm to people? A guide for the *Kohanim*, the book is a guide toward wholeness. The primary word for offering is *korban*, from *karov/close, near*. The one who makes an offering is called the *makriv*, one who draws near, who facilitates closeness, the coming together of people with each other and thereby with God. It is a timeless calling for each of us to rise to, to be one who draws others near.

*Vayikra* is a book that teaches us to be open to the hidden, to unexpected sources of wisdom and guidance on the path to wholeness and peace. I like to think it is for this reason that remarkably it is *Sefer Vayikra* that is traditionally the first book of Torah that children are taught. In a *midrash*, Rabbi Asi asks, *for what reason do children begin with Torat Kohanim/the guide for the Kohanim, and don't begin with B'reishit?* Referring to the purity of the offerings, Rabbi Asi then answers, *the children are pure, let the pure come and busy themselves with the pure*. Commenting on the letter *aleph*, the last letter of the first word of the portion and book of *Vayikra*, as it is to be written so small, *VAYIKRa*, a later commentator, the K'li Yakar, says, *the little aleph is a hint that little ones begin their studies here, it is the beginning, as the aleph is the beginning of the letters*. Speaking to all of us, the K'li Yakar then says, *learning is sustained only by those who make themselves small*.

May we enter the third book of the Torah with such humility, open to engagement and possibility, receiving with delight the gifts of unexpected encounters.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor