

Vayikra, April 5, 2025, 80th birthday

Shabbat Shaloim.

When I directed Midrasha, the program for Jewish teens, we had a clever marketing strategy. Each spring Desmid Lyon, my officemate and I would cut piles of large squares of blue tissue paper. We'd grab two or three to make a strong enough container and plunk three Hershey kisses in the middle. We'd then tie the bundle up with blue ribbon and attach to it a piece of cardstock in the shape of a key on which we had written: "Your Key to Midrasha. "I would then take these packages to classes of 7th graders in each of Midrasha's ten partner synagogues, like the Amitim class here at Netivot Shalom and to the 8th grades of the three day schools in the area. I would visit each class and explain what Midrasha was all about and tell them the fun they would have the following year when they enrolled, explain the logistics, usually have a current student or two give a testimonial and then I would give one of those chocolate packages to each student. I would tell them that in my grandfather's time, on the first day of school teachers of little boys... and yes, it was just boys... would put a drop of honey on the page of Hebrew that they were learning so that in the child's mind, learning was something sweet. Likewise, we at Midrasha wanted these children's first connection to Midrasha to be sweet, hence the chocolate. Often, as I was leaving the room, there would already be tissue paper and silver foil on the floor, but sometimes a student would come to me at a Midrasha graduation, 5 years later, and tell me that they still had their cardboard key. Maybe some of you in this room remember my visit to your classroom.

I told the story of honey on the page, yes, but I really didn't understand it. The part that I usually left out was that the text that was presented to these small boys on their first day of school was this very parsha, Vayikra. Really? Weird rituals of animal sacrifices? Who thought that one up? I don't think this lesson plan would have been suggested when I went to Ed School. And honey on a page? Really? Doesn't that ruin

the book? There was no way to laminate paper in those days, no plastic wrap or parchment paper to lay on top of the words. Clearly, I had some digging to do. I had tried once before. In the late 1970's, soon after Ed and I were married, I did an oral history of my grandfather who had immigrated to America from Ukraine at age 19. He had lived with us in an extended family both for the first 6 years of my life when we shared a duplex with him and my grandmother and then again after my grandmother died when I was 15 and we converted the den of our suburban house into a bedroom for him but he never talked much about his early life. At the time I did the oral history, my grandfather must have been about three years older than I am now, but to me he seemed OLD. Despite my questions in front of the tape recorder, he steered the conversation to talking about his various work experiences from capmaker to small menswear store owner to part-time real estate broker. When I asked him about his shtetl and about his time in cheder, he was vague. His mother had died in childbirth and his distraught father dumped my infant grandfather and his older sister at the home of his maternal grandmother who raised them along with at least one cousin and probably some of her own younger children. I'm sure education wasn't a high priority. I never asked him specifically if on his first day of school he studied Vayikra but I think if I had asked, he would have given me a blank look.

So, why did the teachers of my grandfather's time – and probably for the two thousand years before that - start small children off reading about animal sacrifices? There are many guesses.

If you still have your chumash and look at the first word of the parsha, Vayikra. You might notice that the last letter, the aleph, is small. While this is most probably the result of scribal error, a lot of other explanations rationalizing the existence of the small aleph have arisen, including one that the small aleph symbolizes calling -as in Vayikra, and He called -children to study Torah. Small aleph, small children. Calling Moses, Calling children. Well, maybe.

My friend Mary Breiner told me she thought that kids that age like things with no ambiguity and Leviticus with all its rules is certainly not ambiguous. She also added that repetition is a good tool when learning a language and Leviticus is certainly repetitious. We get a set of instructions for a burnt offering, then similar wording for the minchah or grain offering and then again for the sh'lamim or well-being offering. As long as you've learned one set of vocabulary words, you might as well keep using them over and over. Mary also thinks that little boys like gory stories about animals being slaughtered and blood being dashed all over the place. Maybe, but I also remember picking up one of my children from a day camp on the CAL campus, only to find him distraught because groundskeepers were poisoning moles or voles or some underground creatures on the soccer field. I'm sure the subject matter of animal sacrifice would have greatly upset some of those nursery-school aged boys while captivating others.

The Yalkut Shimoni, or "Gathering of Simon," a midrash on the books of Tanakh, compiled between the 11th and 14th centuries asks, "Why do young children start with Torat Kohanim?"-another name for the Book of Vayikra. The answer it gives is that since the korbanot- the sacrifices- are pure and the children are pure, let the pure come and deal with the pure."

When I talked to Rabbi Judith Hauptman about this, neither Judith nor I bought that answer. She also told me that when she grew up attending an Orthodox Hebrew School, students were first given parshat Lech Lecha, the third parsha, in which Abram is sent forth to Canaan. Her explanation was that people thought that if children had read the first two parshiyot, they would have too many questions. Really? Snakes that talk, a couple set nude in a garden, fratricide, an ark where animals obediently enter two by two, a flood, Noah getting drunk and being sexually inappropriate, Methuselah living over 900 years, people building a tower to heaven? And we don't want 5 year-olds reading that? Maybe not. Another theory of why children started their learning with Vayikra and not with B'reishit is based on the assumption that it is

more important for a Jew to know how to behave and what to do, (and we find nearly half of our 613 mitzvot in Leviticus) than to know the background and makeup of his/her universe (which we find in the first few chapters of Genesis.) Again, I don't buy it.

There is a tradition that the first piece of Bible that the famous second century rabbinic sage, Rabbi Akiva studied after he had mastered the *alef bet* was from Vayikra. Granted, he was supposedly 40 years old but educationally, having been illiterate, he was like those 5-year-olds.

My own Jewish education did not start with Vayikra. Public school kindergarten in Milwaukee where I grew up began at age four, not five like many other places in the country. I LOVED school but sadly, public school met only 5 days a week. However on Sunday, I could see many nicely dressed children my age walking into a big building at the far corner across the street. I told my parents I wanted to go where those other kids were going every Sunday. In preparing this drash, I worried that my memory of that moment 76 years ago when I was four, was faulty. Was that big building really across the street? Could it have been blocks away? So I went to Google Maps. And there it was, a large institution taking up half of the block across the street. My parents had explained to me why I couldn't go with those other children to the big building at the end of the block. But it was only when I stared at Google maps, probably for the first time in my life, that I learned its name, St. Catherine's. My parents were of course horrified that I was clamoring to attend a Catholic Church and they realized they needed to join a synagogue, and one with a Sunday School, in a hurry. The shul they chose began their Sunday School with 5-year-olds, not 4-year-olds but my parents explained the situation, begged that I be allowed to start a year early and I was enrolled. My dim memories of that first day of my Jewish education had something to do with cutting out paper menorahs with blunt nosed scissors. No Vayikra involved at all.

The computer site My Jewish Learning answers the questions of why children begin their studies with Vayikra by quoting Leviticus Rabbah

7:3 “It ... has been suggested that Jewish learning began here to teach from the outset that life involves sacrifice.”

I don't buy that. I don't think that children, much less adults equate killing an animal in the Temple to what we now think of when we use the word “sacrifice.” Which led me to ponder the word “sacrifice.”

Today we use the word “sacrifice” pretty loosely, deviating from the original meaning of the word. Merriam Webster tells us sacrifice is: “an act of offering to a deity something precious” but a further definition is one that enters at least my mind - and maybe yours when I hear the word sacrifice: “the destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else.” You know, you **sacrifice** going to a party because your sick grandmother needs you. You **sacrifice** a night's sleep to comfort a colicky baby. You **sacrifice** going to a concert that just got announced because of a previously scheduled family trip. And if you are a ball player, you let loose a sacrifice fly to the outfield so that your teammate on third can dash home and score even though you will be out. In other words, we give up doing something because of a higher need. But do we really give up much? I'd rather be helping my grandmother than going to that party anyway. And I'm so glad I have my new baby that I don't care if she cries half the night. And as much as the concert would have been nice, that family trip to Paris..... It's not much of a sacrifice.

So, what have we learned? Since Talmudic times, Jewish education started with our parsha. The reasons vary and sound to my ears like rationalizations. I prefer the nursery schools of today with their fuzzy Torahs in pretend arcs and challah baking on Fridays or in my case, my kindergarten introduction to Judaism with paper menorahs and blunt nosed scissors. Jonathan Sarna, in one of his books about American Jewish history, pointed out that every decade or so the focus of Jewish education shifts. I look back over my own 80 years to some that I remember. First people think Jewish continuity will be preserved if only we had an emphasis on Shabbat, then it's Kashrut, then it's Israel, then it's Hebrew language, then it's Jewish history, then it's Tanach, then it's

social justice or just “making things relevant.” We flail around for the right curriculum to impart the core of Judaism. The only thing we seem to agree on in these modern times is that the sacrifices on the alter in the Temple shouldn’t be a child’s introduction to their Judaism. No splashing blood and burning bulls for us.

Shabbat Shalom