

MARCH 11, 2013

Parashat Vayikra

A Great Investment

And God called to Moses (Leviticus 1:1)

ויקרא אל משה (ויקרא א:א)

The Sages in the Midrash (Midrash Eichah 1) note that the letter *aleph* in the first word of the book of Leviticus alludes to the very youngest children. “Said Rabbi Yehuda: See how greatly God loves small children...for when the children were exiled, the *Shechinah* went into exile with them.” Rabbi Yaakov Balfus in Yalkut Lekach Tov (Vol. 3) connects this comment of the Midrash to the theme of education, writing that the small *aleph* represents not only the children, but also the “*aleph* of wisdom,” teaching us that the people of Israel merited the presence of God in their midst because of their commitment to the education of even the smallest children.

The small *aleph* in the first word of Leviticus highlights the importance of the education we give to our youngest children. Today, Israel takes this message seriously as it leads in advancing and improving early childhood education.

For years, early childhood education experts have argued that preschool can have a profound effect on a child’s long-term development. Recent research has bolstered that claim, and academic studies have highlighted the long-term effects of a child’s early education. According to studies reported by the [Brookings Institute](#), all five major American early childhood education programs have had positive impacts on children’s cognitive skills and also have had positive impacts on children’s emotional and behavioral outcomes. [The Economist](#) noted that among member nations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Israel demonstrated the greatest effect of pre-school on later reading scores, as children with one or more year of preschool far outpaced children with no early childhood education. [Haaretz](#) reported that last year, following summer-long social protests, the Israeli government implemented nationwide, free early childhood education across the country. This move will undoubtedly have a significant, long-term impact on Israel’s future growth, offering children from Israel’s poorest socioeconomic levels the developmental benefits of early childhood education. For more on Israel’s achievements, click [here](#).

Rabbi Yaakov Balfus’ interpretation of the small *aleph* in the first word of Leviticus highlights the importance of educating our smallest children. By investing in the education of its youngest children, Israel’s leadership has taken this message to heart. ■

Futile Acts

When any man brings an offering from you (Leviticus 1:2)

אדם כי יקריב מכם (ויקרא א:ב)

At first glance at the text, a sacrificial animal offering appears to be an easy path to atonement. Seemingly, after committing a sin, all one would need to do was bring an animal to the Temple as a sacrifice, and all would be forgiven. Yet, S’forno explains that this was not the case. Instead, intent carried as much weight as the act of sacrifice itself. Noting that the text describes a sacrifice as being “from you,” S’forno (on 1:2) comments that it must come, “from your essence, with a verbal confession and submission...for there is no need for fools who offer [sacrifices] with no prior [sense of] submission.” The act of offering the sacrifice cannot alone achieve atonement. Without authentic remorse, a sacrifice is a meaningless, wasteful act.

S'forno teaches us that sacrifices lacking any underlying sincerity are fruitless and futile. Similarly, negotiating without sincerity or any intention of reaching a fair and just conclusion represents a similarly futile endeavor.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently said that Iran is using negotiations over its nuclear program to stall for time to develop an atomic weapon, [Business Week](#) reported. Netanyahu told the over 13,000 attendees at AIPAC's recent policy conference in Washington that Iran is "running out the clock." Netanyahu stated "[Iran] has used negotiations, including the most recent ones, in order to buy time to press ahead with its nuclear program." General James Mattis, head of U.S. Central Command [agreed](#), telling the Senate Armed Services Committee that Tehran has a history of denial and deceit and is "enriching uranium beyond any plausible peaceful purpose." While he said it still may be possible to use sanctions and other pressure to bring Tehran "to its senses," he also warned that he believes Iran is using the ongoing negotiations to buy time. Since talks in Moscow last June, Iran has continued to increase its stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent purity, has begun to install a new generation of centrifuges and has not yet completed an agreement on inspection of suspect military sites with the International Atomic Energy Agency, a deal originally advertised as all but done last May. To press Iran to comply with international demands, the United Nations Security Council, the United States and the European Union have created an increasingly painful set of economic sanctions on Iran, as part of a dual-track strategy—negotiations and sanctions. The United States must make every effort to enforce the biting sanctions to coerce Iran to abandon its stalling tactics and negotiate in good faith. For more on Iran, visit www.aipac.org/Iran.

Sacrifices only had meaning when they represented authentic remorse. Similarly, negotiations only carry meaning when the parties negotiate with the intent of reaching a conclusion. ■

The Right Choice

He shall bring it according to his will (Leviticus 1:3)

יקריב אתו לרצונו (ויקרא א:ג)

Rashi (on 1:3) notes that if a sinner refuses to offer a required sacrifice, "we coerce him until he says 'I want [to bring the offering].'" How can the community or the court compel someone to offer a sacrifice against his will? Maimonides (Laws of Divorce 2:20) explains that in fact it's not coercion but rather, deep down, we all want to do the right thing. In that case, the community encourages us to make the proper choice by negating the negative forces that are preventing us from choosing the proper path. It is for this reason that we influence him, "until he says, 'I want.'"

Maimonides teaches us that outside influence can help individuals make the right choices. In this light, the United States should continue to exert influence and encourage Egypt to maintain quiet along its border with Israel.

In 1979 Egypt became the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel, removing the threat of attack by the Arab world's most populous and powerful country. Although the peace had been cold, Cairo adhered to its main treaty commitments: full diplomatic relations, keeping the Sinai as a demilitarized buffer zone, permitting the presence in the Sinai of the U.S.-led Multinational Force and Observers, and maintaining freedom of navigation through the Suez Canal even for Israeli warships. Egypt has been the key U.S. strategic ally in the Arab world, having worked with the United States in opposing Islamic radicalism in its many forms (Hamas in Gaza, al-Qaeda in the entire region, Hezbollah in Lebanon) and had also been a strong opponent of Iran's nuclear program and efforts to attain regional hegemony. In return, Egypt benefited from massive annual U.S. military and economic assistance. With the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, the future of Egyptian-Israeli peaceful relations has been called into question. During this period of turmoil, the United States must use all available measures to press Egypt to uphold its peace treaties with Israel as the cornerstones of regional peace and stability, and to retake control of the Sinai Peninsula and prevent the area's continued deterioration into a terrorist safe heaven. For more on Egypt, click [here](#).

Just as Maimonides explains that the community can encourage an individual to make the proper choice, the United States must make every effort to press Egypt to maintain stability crucial for regional peace. ■

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