

HOW BIG IS THE SMALL “ALEPH”?

In memory of
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At the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, we find an aleph at the end of the word “vayikra” that is smaller than the rest of the letters. The Ba’al HaTurim’s classic reason for this is that Moshe did not want to stand out, a manifestation of his classic modesty, anivus. Since Bilaam was called by Hashem using the word Vayikar, without the aleph, Moshe felt the same word should be used for him. Hashem insisted that Moshe use the aleph, a sign of His love for Moshe, so as a compromise a smaller aleph was written conveying the message of anivus while fulfilling Hashem’s demand that the aleph be used.

Dovid Gewurtz asked me a very good question on this Pshat. The reality is that once the size of the letter is changed, whether larger or smaller, attention is drawn to it, which is exactly what Moshe did not want. So, what’s the point behind the small aleph if it compromises the message of anivus Moshe is trying to convey? Furthermore, in light of this, we find in Bamidbar (12:3) when Miriam speaks about Moshe’s relationship with his wife, the Torah clearly expresses, “And the man Moshe was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth”. Moshe protests the small aleph in Vayikra while we never hear a word regarding an entire verse in Parashat Bahaloscha that addresses the same issue of humility. How are we to understand this??

The reality is that there is a huge difference between these 2 events. Hashem was fully aware that Moshe would not defend himself against the misunderstanding that Miriam was expressing. Hashem therefore comes to Moshe’s defense and provides the reason why He must do so in the pasuk quoted above – because of his anivus. Why here?? Shtika k’hodoah dami. By remaining silent, Moshe (and by extension Hashem) would be inferring that Miriam was right. In Moshe’s eyes, being right in this instance was not as important as remaining humble and at peace with his siblings. Moshe would give his life to defend Hashem, His Torah and His people. To defend himself though, this, in Moshe’s eyes was a violation of the anivus he thoroughly dedicated himself to. Why did Moshe permit himself to remain silent, humble? Because he knew he was right in having a celibate relationship with his wife. (Said misunderstanding revolved around the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu took a vow of celibacy. This way, he was available to meet with Hashem the moment he was called upon. The Midrash relates that it was this very point that tripped up Miriam. The night before all this occurred Miriam engaged in relations with her husband. When called to the Ohel Moed, she had to first run to the Mikveh to purify herself. Moshe took his vow in order to avoid this very problem.) Whether anyone else agreed with this stringency Moshe took upon himself was to him. Moshe was not doing anything public that would convey the wrong message. There was no moras ayin going on here. On the positive side, his availability to Hashem Yisborach never ceased, even for a moment. When the “doorbell” rang, Moshe was prepared to answer it immediately.

For the sake of justice, Hashem could not remain silent. Hashem’s involvement enabled Moshe’s to remain humble while conveying the message to Miriam regarding her error in whom she was criticizing. Rov Soloveichik brings down that what Miriam failed to realize was the “segulah relationship” – the treasured nature of the relationship that Hashem enjoyed with Moshe. It was distinct and at a more profound level than with any other prophet before or after him. Therefore, the reason Moshe did not complain about writing the verse in Bamidbar is because although the dialog discussed an issue that relates directly to the manner Moshe conducted his marital life, the interaction did not involve him personally. The conversation is between Tziporah, Miriam and Aharon before Hashem intercedes. When the three of them are called to the Ohel Moed, Moshe remained silent. The first words Moshe utters is his short prayer pleading for Miriam’s cure from the Tzora’as that resulted from her loшон hara. Can you

Vayikra 5779
TORAT HAR SHMUEL
by
TASHMA

imagine the shock Moshe went through when he found out why they were called to the Ohel Moed? Being the focus of attention, especially regarding something this private and personal must have really taken him by surprise. Nonetheless, he was not personally part of the discussion. Despite his presence at the Ohel Moed, this was between Hashem & Miriam.

The issue regarding the aleph in Vayikra is radically different. Here it is all about Moshe, as no one else other than Hashem & Moshe were involved. The beauty of Moshe's anivus is clearly demonstrated here in the reality that it is truly L'Shaim Shamayim. This matter is totally private, between Hashem & Moshe in a realm and at a level that no other human being has ever achieved. Even while in Hashem's Presence, Moshe was not looking for any additional attention, a reason to be singled out or seen as special. His anivus is so authentic, so pure, that he fights against the aleph while in this private domain, alone with Hashem. It's one thing to act in a L'Shaim Shamyim manner when everyone is watching. It's at a much higher level to behave in this manner when only Hashem sees what's going on. What's interesting about Moshe is that if he could hide the anivus from Hashem, he would, recognizing that this is what the personality trait is all about. Moshe knows he cannot, for Hashem knows everything. So, he does the next best thing. He fights to exemplify this as much as he can. Moshe could not have the aleph removed, so he settles for a diminished one. One way or another, the midda is going to win.

The difference between the 2 parshiyos is clear. In Bamidbar, Moshe is on the outside looking in, and therefore has no say in how an event that may revolve around him but does not include him is conveyed. Therefore, he cannot comment on the pasuk describing his modesty. In Vayikra, the small aleph is all about Moshe, and here, although he has a say as to how the message is going to be conveyed, it will not be at the expense of what Hashem wants. Hashem conveys the message He wants without compromising the anivus that Moshe dedicates his personality to.

One needs to understand the nature and source of the anivus that Moshe exemplifies. Moshe had the distinct advantage of being the only human being to experience direct communication with Hashem. In doing so, they not only exchanged messages, information, but Moshe Rabbeinu "experienced" Hashem on a level that no other human being ever achieved. This reality reached its pinnacle when Moshe was called to Heaven to receive the Torah, (Shabbos 88b – 89a). The angels questioned why Moshe is even there and argued with Hashem that the Israelites should not receive the Torah. Hashem called upon Moshe to defend his right on behalf of Klal Yisroel to bring Hashem's Heavenly Sefer down to the physical world in which we live. Moshe asked the angels if they have parents, if they eat, if they can fulfill any of the physically based Mitzvos found in the Torah. This was Moshe's proof that Torah was meant for mankind, not for the

angels.

This event is not to be taken lightly, as evidenced by another event brought down by the same Gemara and Midrash. Moshe ascends to heaven and experiences a "world" that no other living human being has ever seen. He comes back to our world totally transformed, elevated, as there is a Divine glow emanating from him. What he took away from this, the "mussar haskil" of this experience explains Moshe's humility. The foundation of Moshe's anivus is the reality, experience, perception and understanding that Hashem is Everything, ('Ain Od Milvado' justifies the capital E), and we are nothing. The consequence of Moshe's dedication to this philosophy is nothing short of grand. In the process of looking at himself as "nothing", Hashem transforms him into "everything" – the greatest Prophet to have ever lived, past, present and future, (a reality that every major religion validates even today). The Gemara is Shabbos cited above (89a) continues with the Satan questioning Hashem as to the whereabouts of Hashem's Torah. After searching everywhere, the Satan returns to Hashem claiming he cannot find it. Hashem instructs him to ask "Ben Amram" –Moshe. Upon doing so, Moshe responds, "Who am I that HKB'H should have given me the Torah". Hashem accused Moshe of being a "ba'do'ee"- delusional. How could Moshe tell the Satan he didn't receive the Torah?? Moshe responded, "Hashem, You have this coveted and hidden treasure that you delight in every day, and I'm going to flatter myself by telling the Satan that You gave it to me"!?? Hashem responds, "Since you diminished yourself in receiving the Torah, it shall be called by your name", which is why we refer to the Torah as "Toras Moshe". (Shabbos 89a)

Moshe was humble, not naïve!! He knew he was a great man having achieved more than any other human being in the history of mankind. Nonetheless, he realized that one's barometer of excellence is not measured in what other people think or expect of us but is measured in living up to Hashem's expectations of us exclusively. Although we may deny it at times, we all know what those expectations are. Moshe knew first hand he could not achieve the perfected Unity that is Hashem Yisborach, but he did experience interacting with perfection through his communication with Hashem. Through this, he realized and taught us who we have to answer to, the standards by which to evaluate our personal success in this world, and the reality that when it's all said and done, Hashem is Everything and we are nothing. Simple acknowledgement of this reality and a personality that reflects it is what transforms the inner sense of nothingness into an expressed image of profound sophistication and concrete value.

One of the greatest challenges we are faced with is exemplifying this anivus in the here and now of today's world. It would be foolish to think that our strengths serve no valid pur-

pose. How does one simultaneously remain humble while permitting their strengths to shine? The answer lies in how we view ourselves, from where those strengths come and ultimately who those strengths serve. If we use our talents to strengthen others, improve the community we live in, contribute not for our sake but to sanctify the name of Hashem Yisborach, then the 'candle' of humility and strength can burn simultaneously at both ends. How strong we are can only be measured in the strength and confidence we share and inspire others with.

There's a famous event that exemplifies this philosophy. The Ponovizher Rov (Ha'Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahanaman ZT'L) was with the Brisker Rov (Ha'Rav Yitzchak Zev Soloveichik ZT'L) and another person. The guest asked both of them why the Chofetz Chaim was known for his humility when in fact his greater achievement was that he was an unparalleled Torah genius. The Brisker Rov explained to both of them that the Chofetz Chaim prayed that his superb Torah intellect be hidden from the masses, and his Tefillah was accepted. Sometime later, the Ponovizher Rov was by the Bais Yisroel (Ha'Rav Yisroel Alter ZT'L, from the

Gerrer dynasty) and repeated this event.

He then asked the Bais

Yisroel something he regretted not having asked the Brisker Rov. Why didn't the Chofetz Chaim simultaneously pray that his exceptional middos also be hidden from the rest of the community? The Bais Yisroel replied that the Chofetz Chaim never viewed himself as exceptional in his middos. He thought that when it came to middos, every Jew was just like him.

If we view ourselves as nothing, how are we to relate to other people? The answer comes from the fourth chapter of Pirke Avos, the first Mishna. "Ayze hu m'chubad, ha'm'chabed es habriyos". We treat others as "grand somethings". In celebrating the life of another, we simultaneously celebrate Hashem's creation of their unique Neshama. As important as it is to take stock of our talents, our strengths, we must be constantly aware that today's success in life is measured on how our gifts enhance the quality of someone else's life. May we all be zoche to exemplify all of our Middos as Hashem wants us to.