

In this week's "Ten Minutes of Torah" Rabbi Lance Sussman mentioned the Reader's Digest Abridged Hebrew Scriptures in which the entire book of Leviticus was just a few pages. I think that does a good job of summing up most of our reactions to Leviticus, the third book of the Torah which we begin tonight. Its first 16 chapters, most likely a training manual for the ancient priesthood, does not make for scintillating reading.

Yet with all the challenges in this book, some interesting lessons can be derived from it. One historically Jewish approach to Leviticus is to see it as parallel to Genesis. Both are about Creation, one about the creation of the world out of nothing, and the second about something at least as miraculous, "the emergence of a stable community with benevolent and life sustaining order". I don't think until this year, I truly appreciated how wondrous good government and civil order are and how precious.

Amid the recipes for the various sacrifices come some lessons about leadership.

The book begins, “and God called to Moses- Vayikra”, but the alef in Vayikra, is by scribal tradition in every Torah scroll diminished, until it is only half as big as the other letters. This is only small aleph in the Torah and is one of 17 places among the 300,000 letters of the Torah where we have something special like this. Why the small aleph?

Many lessons are derived from it but to me this year the most meaningful are about Moses’ humility. God calls to him, inviting Moses into relationship, before beginning to give him instructions. This is an act of politeness, derech erez, which we are meant to imitate in our own lives.

And Moses approaches God with humility. In transcribing these words on Mt Sinai, Moses doesn’t want to make too much of this call by God, and so he diminishes the alef. Moses has attained the highest level, he is the greatest of prophets, but he never became impressed with himself. The Midrash explains it thus. Moses wanted to write Vayikar and it happened that God said to Moses, but God wanted it to show Moses the honor of calling to him first, vayikrah. The compromise, Moses wrote the aleph of called, but wrote it small, as if it just happened and wasn’t a great honor to him.

Humility is important in a leader, but the text suggests it is not always present.

Concerning the average person, Leviticus says, if a man should sin, but the text changes the proposition from if to when, in talking about leaders. There it says, “when a leader sins”. Why is a leader more likely to fall into wrongdoing ? Our tradition asserts it is because of ego, because of pride.

Rabbi Bachya, a medieval scholar, taught: “A prince’s heart is very vulgar, and pride, which is the cause of sin, is a function of his rule.” Sforno, an Italian medieval commentator concurred, powerful and wealthy people are likely to sin, he says, as there is less to restrain them. The same theme is picked up by the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali ben Yehudah, an Orthodox rabbi who lived in Berlin in the 19th century, “The leader’s elevated status causes him to commit wittingly sins that are so egregious that ordinary people do not commit them even unwittingly.” In essence, our tradition teaches, the leaders’ sins are not despite their exalted position but because of it.

Having the leader acknowledge their own wrongdoing is difficult, for that reason Rashi comments- the Torah uses the word asher, when, which can also be the consonants for ashrei, happy or fortunate. How can we be happy or fortunate when a leader sins? Rashi explains: “Happy or fortunate the generation whose leader is willing to admit having missed the mark.”

It is important for powerful people to acknowledge their sin and feel remorse to prevent them from sinning again. It is also a significant model for the community as a whole. An Ashkenazi commentator the Malbim focuses on this in saying: “The Torah desires that a leader bring a sin offering when he sins so that the common people will imitate his example.”

As we read the beginning of Leviticus this year, we feel the longing for an orderly moral universe, to parallel the structured law abiding physical universe. We can learn from Moses’s example the importance of humility in leadership and pray to live in Rashi’s world, where leaders acknowledging the times they have missed the mark, act as a goad to each of us as well.