

Welcome to the third book of the Torah, **ויקרא-Vayikra**. If you look at the actual Torah scroll, you will see that the first word is written with a small *aleph* like this: **ויקרא**. Why is there a small *aleph*? We should start by saying that there are various anomalies in the Torah around certain letters.

The first letter of the Torah is a big **ב**. The **ע** and the **ד** of **שמע ישראל ה' אחד** are larger. There are dots on some letters, some letters are broken, there are even upside-down letters. In short, there are plenty of examples of *orthographic diversity* (OGD) in the Torah.

Each instance gives rise to layers upon layers of interpretation, some homiletical, some mystical. Occasionally, we get someone who will *ascribe a scrupulously scribal scrutinium* for these things. For example, on this small *aleph*, Shmuel David Luzzatto writes:

<p>לענין א' זעירא עין מה שכתבתי על קצתי בקתי (בראשית כ"ז מ"ו).                  הקו"ף זעירה, נראה לי כי היה מנהג הסופרים בימי קדם כשהתחילת תבנה מתחלת באותה האות שהתבנה הקודמת מסתמט, היו משמיטין אחת מהאותיות הדומות, ואולי היו מצנינין האות ההיא באיזה סימן להודיע שיהיא עומדת במקום שנים, ואחר זמן הוסיפו בין שתי התבות האות החסרה, ולהיות המקום צר כתבו אותה זערה, וכיוצא בזה ויקרא אל משה. והנה מהמנהג להשמיט אחת מהדומות נמשכו פה וכה קצת טעיות, קצתם נתקנו... וקצתם לא נתקנו.</p>	<p><i>See my comment on the phrase, katzti be-hayyai, זעתי בחיי (Gen. 27:46) - (another instance of a small letter, in that case, the small ק). There he writes:</i>  <i>The letter ק in קצתי is written small. It seems to me that this is because it was the custom of the scribes in ancient times, that when a word began with the same letter as the final letter of the preceding word, they would delete one of the identical letters, and perhaps they marked the remaining letter with some sign to make it known that it stood in the place of two. After some time, they added the missing letter between the two words, and because the space was narrow, they wrote it small; an example of this is ויקרא אל משה (where the א' in ויקרא immediately preceding the א' in אל is written small). Because of the custom of omitting one of the two identical consecutive letters, here and there [in later books of the Bible] some errors were perpetuated, some of them being corrected... and some being left uncorrected.</i></p>
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He goes on to list several examples of OGD. Two things are important about his comment. 1. It is based on observation, logic and reasonable hypothesis, ie. the scientific method. Given that Luzzatto lived in post-Enlightenment Italy (19th Century) and was an early

advocate for the critical study of the Bible, this is not surprising. 2. It is so markedly different from all the other midrashic and mystical interpretations of this particular OGD that it almost reads as though he is poking us in the eye. He is saying to an entire glossola-

lia of rabbis, whose words literally fill volumes: **Really? All of this ink for a scribal anomaly?** On the other hand, some of us actually do enjoy both the rational and the imaginative interpretations, with a dose of mysticism from time to time. Here are two examples:

<p>שמשה בענותותו הרחיק עצמו מהשגרה והיה בורח ומקטין עצמו עד שהצטרף ה' לקוראו. ולזה כתב בכאן ויקרא אל משה באלה קטנה.</p>	<p><i>Moses in his humility distanced himself from authority, he demurred and diminished himself until God found it necessary to call him. To indicate this effort, the text writes the word <b>vayikra</b> with a small aleph.</i>                  Tzror Hamor 15th century.</p>	<p>ויקרא אל"ף זעירא לומר שאף שקראו הש"י ונעשה לו כל הכבוד הנה ונדבר עמו תדיר אעפ"כ הקטין עצמו לפניו ית' ולפני ישראל.</p>	<p><i>There is a small aleph in <b>vayikra</b> to tell us that even though God called him and gave him all sorts of honor and spoke to him often, even still, he made himself small before God and Israel.</i> Paneah Raza 17th c.</p>
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A common theme of the imaginative commentary is that the small *aleph* is a symbol for Moses' humility. Moses, the object of the **call**, made himself **small**. But this idea connects to another major theme in the literature on this verse: the difference between the **aleph-ful** word, **ויקרא-and He called** and the **aleph-less**

word, **ויקרא-and He encountered**. **ויקרא** means: God **deliberately called Moses, with intent and conviction**. **ויקר** is related to the word **מקרה**-which means, **accident**. If the **aleph-less** word were used here, it would mean that **God just so happened to accidentally appear to Moses**. Bad. More

importantly, **ויקר** is the word that the Torah uses when it describes God's appearance to Bilam, the itinerant "prophet" who Balak, King of Moab hired to curse Israel. In that story, the Torah says: **ויקר אלהים אל בלעם And God encountered Bil'am** (Num. 23:4) (by chance). That gives rise to this midrash:

<p>מה בין נביאי ישראל לנביאי אמות העולם?                  ... רבי חמא בר חנינא אמר אין הקדוש ברוך הוא נגלה על אמות העולם אלא בחצי דבור כמה דתימר ויקר אלהים אל בלעם (במדבר כג:ד) אבל נביאי ישראל בדבור שלם שנאמר: ויקרא אל משה. (ויקרא א:א) וי"ר א:ג</p>	<p><i>What is the difference between the prophets of Israel and the prophets of the nations of the world? ... R. Hama bar Hanina said: God appears to the nations of the world with fractional speech, as it is said, God <b>accidentally</b> appeared to Bilam (Num. 23:4). But to the prophets of Israel, He appears with full (formal) speech as it is said, And he <b>called</b></i></p>	<p><i>to Moses.</i> (Lev. 1:1) Vayikra Rabbah 1:13  <b>Comment:</b> <b>ויקר</b> is a fraction (4/5) of the word <b>ויקרא</b>. The operating presumption here is that to the prophets of Israel, Moses chief among them, God communicates more intimately and directly that He does with the prophets of other peoples. God and Israel have a "private channel" of communication, a channel that is stronger, clearer, has more bandwidth, and a channel that has delivered the most essential messages for all of human civilization.</p>
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<p><b>A Child's Education Begins with Vayikra.</b> There is a long tradition that children were to start their Torah study with this book, and specifically with this verse. The rabbis record this tradition in many places. Here is one typical example from <i>Vayikra Rabbah</i>:</p>	<p>אמר רבי אסי מפני מה מתחילין לתינוקות בתורה פהנים ואין מתחילין בבראשית? אלא שהתינוקות טהורין והקרבת בטהורין. ובואו טהורין ויתעסקו בטהורים.</p>	<p><b>R. Asi said, why do we begin to teach children with Torat Kohanim (Vayikra) and not from Bereishit? Because the children are pure and the sacrifices are pure. Let the pure ones come and be busy with the pure ones.</b></p>	<p>This idea animated Jewish learning for centuries. It would not be surprising to find some communities even to this day</p>
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who begin teaching Torah to their children from **Vayikra**. Sure, the book has, at its core, an emphasis on *purity*. But today it is difficult to present the world of sacrifices with that emphasis. Various other explanations have been given for why children ought to start with **Vayikra**: it orients a child to the worship of God; it establishes a context of holiness; and later on, (skipping the parts on childbirth and skin diseases) the book deals with the basic ethical ways people ought to treat each other, and the central command, **Love your neighbor as yourself**. Today, most curricula do indeed, start with Bereishit. But listen to what R. Nahman of Bratslav says:

<p>ודע שתנוקות של בית רבן מקבלים הכל פיהם שאין בו חטא מזה המשכן ועל פן התינוק בשמתחיל לקרות ולהפנס בתורה הוא מתחיל מן ויקרא אל משה שהוא אלה זעירא כי ויקרא מדבר מגמר הקמת המשכן שאז קראו השם ותברך והתחיל לדבר עמו מהמשכן ועל פן משם מתחילין התינוקות כי משם מקבלין הכל פיהם... ומשם מתחילין לקרות ולהפנס לתוך התורה:</p>	<p><b>And know, the young schoolchildren receive the undefiled breath of their mouths from this sanctuary. Therefore, when a young child first begins to read and enter the study of Torah, he begins with Vayikra—[the word Vayikra is written] with a small aleph—because [the Book off Vayikra [starts from the point of] the completion of the Sanctuary construction [at the end of Shmot]. It was then that God called to Moses and began speaking to him from the Sanctuary. This is why the young children begin from there, because it is from there that they receive the breath of their mouths... and from there they begin to read (pun on קרא) and enter into Torah study.</b> Likutei Moharan 282:4</p>	<p><b>Explanation:</b> Set aside the idea of the <b>pure children studying the pure sacrifices</b>. The purpose of starting a child's education from <b>Vayikra</b> is for the child to experience the thrill, majesty, and awe of being <b>called</b> - like Moses - and to learn humility, symbolized by the small <i>aleph</i>. This is an extraordinarily rich teaching.</p>
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In our time, we make so much of educating for self-esteem. What could be more valuable for self-esteem than knowing that God is calling us? *That God is interested...in us!* So, the question that emerges from this discussion is: Which is a more valuable "start" to a child's Torah education? The concept that God created the heavens and the earth, (which would teach us that we are a tiny speck in a vast, unimaginable universe) or that God speaks to us from the completed Sanctuary of His people who have just been freed from slavery in Egypt and are in the desert (which would teach us that we are so important to God, that God would want to have a relationship with us)?

**OGD in the Book of Esther:** The small *aleph* in Vayikra brings to mind a whole scrabble of scribal inscrutables that we find in the Scroll of Esther. Over the centuries, many talented scholars, saints and mystics, have tried to offer explanations of these *escritoires* raising deep questions about how they came up with these things and what substances they were using to *assist* them. Here are just a few of the more fanciful ones, in the spirit of Purim.

1:6	Large ה in חור. <i>cloth hanging</i>	The large ה emphasizes that this curtain was stolen from the Temple. Or, it hints that the Jews themselves sinned, חטאו by attending Ahashverosh's feast.
9:7	The small ר in פרשנדטא. <i>Parshandata</i> was Haman's 1 <sup>st</sup> son.	When Haman was looking for a long piece of wood on which he would hang Mordecai, he couldn't find one, except that his son, <i>Parshandata</i> , the reputedly evil hegemon of Kardonia, had one in his possession. He stole it from the ancient Ark of Noah! And it was now a beam in his house! To indicate his fall from grandeur, the ר-resh is written small.
9:7	The small ת in פרשנדטא.	As the 1 <sup>st</sup> of Haman's sons, he was evidently the most awful. The small ת stands for the decrees against the study of תורה which, when properly studied, a person has to go over the text at least 400 times, which is the numerical value of ת. The 400-fold repetition is an idea found in the Talmud relating to a particular student who employed this method in order to remember things. Eruvin 54b.
9:9	The small ש in פרמשתא. <i>Parmashta</i> was the 7 <sup>th</sup> son.	ש signifies tefillin because ש is 300, and that is the number of days tefillin are worn during the year. Parmashta prohibited the Jews from wearing tefillin. Parmashta is also an Aramaic word for a body part. Perhaps the small ש is making a pejorative point. Alternatively, removing the ש from his name renders it פרמא which is Aramaic for <i>shmatra</i> .
9:9	The big ו in ויתא	Rabbi Yohanan said: The letter <i>vav</i> in the name "Vaizatha" is a lengthened <i>vav</i> and must be elongated as a pole, like a steering oar of a ship [ <i>liberof</i> ]. What is the reason for this? To indicate that they were all hanged on one pole. Megillah 16b

