



Investigating the Phenomenon of the Small Aleph of "ויקרא"

Why Did Moshe Rabeinu Write "ויקרא" in Our Parsha with a Small "Aleph" but Wrote "ויקרא ה' למשה" at Matan Torah with a Normal Sized "Aleph"

This week's parsha is parshas Vayikra. It opens with the passuk (Vayikra 1, 1): **"ויקרא אל משה וידבר ה' אליו מאהל מועד: לאמר—He called to Moshe, and Hashem spoke to him from Ohel Mo'ed saying.** Tradition dictates that the word "ויקרא" be inscribed in a sefer-Torah with a miniature "aleph." According to the Ba'al HaTurim, Moshe Rabeinu did this deliberately due to his extreme humility. **He only wanted to write the word "ויקר" (without the "aleph"), as if HKB"H only communicated with him in a dream state. As it says regarding Bilam (Bamidbar 23, 4): "ויקר אל בלעם"—suggesting that Hashem only appeared to him coincidentally. But HKB"H instructed him (Moshe) to also write the "aleph." Nevertheless, due to his great humility, Moshe requested to be allowed to write the "aleph" smaller than the other "aleph"s in the Torah; so he wrote it in miniature.**

It is clear from the commentary of the Ba'al HaTurim that Moshe Rabeinu did not dare do this independently without HKB"H's permission. On the contrary, Moshe initially requested permission to omit the "aleph" of "ויקרא" completely, and simply write "ויקר", as it appears in the Torah in relation to Bilam. HKB"H, however, did not agree with Moshe's initial plan; instead, Moshe requested to at least be permitted to inscribe a miniature "aleph." To this, HKB"H acquiesced.

Surprisingly, prior to this event, when chronicling the spectacular events of Matan Torah, Moshe wrote the word "ויקרא" as it is normally written (Shemos 19, 20): **"וירד ה' על הר סיני אל ראש ההר ויעל משה למשה ה' ויקרא ה' למשה אל ראש ההר ויעל משה"**—with a normal sized "aleph." There, Moshe did not object to writing

the word "ויקרא" with a normal "aleph." So, why did he object on this occasion?

The Significance of Hashem Descending onto the Top of the Mountain and Moshe Rabeinu Being Invited to the Top of the Mountain

Let us begin by focusing on the aforementioned passuk related to Matan Torah: **"Hashem descended upon Har Sinai to the top of the mountain; Hashem summoned (ויקרא) Moshe to the top of the mountain and Moshe ascended."** We will endeavor to explain why the Torah emphasized the fact that Hashem descended onto the top of the mountain and also saw fit to inform us that Hashem invited Moshe Rabeinu to ascend and join him there.

The Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Shemos 19, 20) offers a simple, straightforward explanation: **Perhaps it (the Torah) is ruling out that the Shechinah did not descend upon the sides of the mountain even in the space above ten tefachim (handbreadths) above the surface of the mountain; even though we do find instances where the Shechinah did descend to low places, as long as there was at least ten tefachim between It and the ground. This is in contrast to how the Shechinah rested on the Mishkan; there, the Glory of Hashem rested wherever Bnei Yisrael camped. Here, however, on the mountain (Sinai), He only descended onto the top of the mountain. Therefore, Moshe had to climb to the top of the mountain, as it specifies in the continuation of the text.**

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to add a pertinent tidbit to his sacred remarks. Why was it crucial to teach us that Hashem only descended upon **“the top of the mountain”** and that Moshe was summoned to ascend specifically to **“the top of the mountain”**? This suggests that the Torah is teaching us a vital lesson related to receiving and accepting the Torah.

It appears that we can explain the matter based on a teaching in the Gemara (Sotah 5a): **“אמר רב יוסף לעולם ילמד אדם מדעת קונו, שהרי הקדוש ברוך הוא הניח כל הרים וגבעות והשרה Rav Yosef said: A person should always learn from the good sense of his Creator—for behold, when HKB”H gave the Torah, He abandoned all the great mountains and hills and instead rested His Shechinah on Har Sinai.** Rashi comments that we are being taught to value modesty and humility from the fact that HKB”H passed over more majestic and taller mountains, such as Har Savor and Har Carmel, in order to give the Torah on the lowly, less imposing Har Sinai, as it is written (Tehillim 68, 17): **“Why do you look askance (alternatively: prance), O you mountains of majestic peaks?”**

Rav Yosef is impressing upon us the fact that HKB”H only rests His Shechinah on a humble person. In fact, further one, the Gemara states (ibid.): **“כל אדם שיש בו גסות הרוח אמר הקדוש ברוך—regarding any person who is haughty, HKB”H proclaims, “He and I cannot coexist in the world.”**

Undoubtedly, the lesson being taught by Rav Yosef—regarding how much HKB”H values the midah of **“anavah”** (humility)—is intimately connected with Matan Torah. For, we have learned in the Gemara (Ta’anis 7a): **“למה נמשלו דברי תורה למים, דכתיב (ישעיה נה-א) הוי כל צמא לכו למים, לומר לך מה מים מניחין מקום גבוה והולכין למקום נמוך, אף דברי תורה אין מתקיימין אלא במי שדעתו שפלה.”** **Why are words of Torah compared to water? . . . To teach us that just as water flows from higher ground to lower ground, so, too, words of Torah are only retained by someone who possesses a lowly self-image (humility).**

This, too, is the reason they taught in the Gemara (Pesachim 66b): **“כל המתיהר אם חכם הוא חכמתו מסתלקת ממנו.”—anyone who displays haughtiness (the opposite of humility), if he is a wise**

man, his wisdom deserts him. This explains fantastically why HKB”H revealed how much He cherishes humility specifically in relation to Matan Torah. After all, without humility, learning and receiving the Torah serves no purpose, since a person will not be privileged to truly attain it and retain it—i.e., it is like water that seeks the lower ground.

A Talmid Chacham Must Possess an Eighth of an Eighth

I would like to introduce another precious insight regarding this subject from the author of the Tanya in Likutei Torah (Parshas Bamidbar). Seemingly, if it was the intent of HKB”H to teach us the importance of humility, why did He choose to give the Torah on a mountain, at all? Why not give us the Torah in a valley or on a flat plain, which exemplify the midah of humility and lowliness to an even greater degree?

Our sacred sefarim explain that HKB”H wished to teach us the following (Sotah 5a): **“תלמיד חכם צריך שיהא בו אחד משמונה בשמינית—a talmid-chacham must have one eighth of an eighth.** Rashi explains: **He must have a small degree of “ga’avah” (arrogance; haughtiness), so that frivolous people will not ridicule him, and so that they will be compelled to accept his teachings (and rulings).** Thus, on the one hand every Jew must avoid arrogance—**“ga’avah”**—a much as possible, in keeping with that which is written (Mishlei 16, 5): **“תועבת ה’ כל גבה לב—every haughty heart is the abomination of Hashem.** Yet it is imperative that Torah-scholars maintain a small degree of **“ga’avah”**—an eighth of an eighth.

It was precisely for this reason that HKB”H gave Yisrael the Torah on Har Sinai. On the one hand, it is the lowest of all the surrounding mountains to emphasize the importance of humility. On the other hand, it is still a mountain and not a valley to emphasize that a talmid-chacham must possess a small degree of haughtiness and stature; otherwise, he will be unable to influence pupils. This is the message Rebbe wished to convey to his son, Rabban Gamliel (Kesubos 103b): **“זרוק—מרה בתלמידים—cast fear upon the students.** To teach them and influence them, they must fear you and respect you.

We also find this concept presented in Chanukas HaTorah (212) in the name of the great Rabbi Heschel of Krakow, ztz”l.

He, too, purports that the Torah was given on the lowly Har Sinai rather than on a plain to teach us that a talmid-chacham must possess an eighth of an eighth of “ga’avah.” He adds a fascinating calculation to explain this amount, which equals 1/64. (By the way, the Chida explains in Pesach Einayim that one part greater would be one part in 63, which is the letters טג— a term associated with true “ga’avah.”)

Now, we learn in the Gemara (B.B. 73b) that the height of Har Savor is four parsah; a parsah is four mil; a mil is two-thousand cubits. Thus, a parsah is 8,000 cubits. Accordingly, the elevation of Har Savor is 32,000 cubits. Now, the Midrash teaches that Har Sinai was only 500 cubits high, which is exactly 1/64 the height of Har Savor. This coincides magnificently with Chazal’s statement that a Torah-scholar must possess an eighth of an eighth, i.e., 1/64.

The Greatness of HKB”H and His Humility Go Hand in Hand

Next, let us refer to the familiar statement (Megillah 31a): “כל מקום שאתה מוצא גדולתו של הקב”ה אתה מוצא ענוותנותו”— **wherever you find HKB”H’s greatness, there you find His humility.** Yet we find a passuk which expresses the opposite (Tehillim, 93, 1): “ה’ מלך גאות לבש”— **Hashem has reigned; He has donned grandeur.** We can explain this apparent contradiction as follows: HKB”H runs the world in such a way that He rewards those who act according to His will, and He punishes those who violate His will. Hence, HKB”H dons, so to speak, a guise of grandeur and haughtiness to throw fear and reverence into His creatures, so that they will behave properly and comply with His will.

This enlightens us as to why the Torah specifies that “**Hashem descended onto Har Sinai to the top of the mountain.**” HKB”H descended specifically onto the top of the mountain, whose elevation is 500 cubits, which is an eighth of an eighth (1/64) of the elevation of Har Savor. This was intended to teach Torah-scholars in all future generations a vital lesson. They should emulate the behavior and actions of the Almighty. Although, He acts with and values “anavah”; nevertheless, He also projects, as it were, a nominal degree of “ga’avah”—an eighth of an eighth—like the elevation of Har Sinai.

This also explains very nicely why HKB”H invited Moshe Rabeinu to ascend “**to the top of the mountain.**” For, the Torah attests to Moshe’s extreme, unmatched humility (Bamidbar 12, 3): “והאיש משה עניו מאד מכל האדם אשר על פני האדמה”. Thus, there was a realistic concern that Moshe might feel himself unworthy and feel that it was improper for him to ascend to the top of the mountain. After all, he was well aware that HKB”H detests “ga’avah,” as per the passuk: “תועבת ה’ כל גבה לב”. So, he might have thought to himself, “Who am I to approach HKB”H by ascending ‘**to the top of the mountain**’ and adorning a modicum of ‘ga’avah’ equal to an eighth of an eighth.”

Therefore, to dispel Moshe’s qualms, it was necessary to invite Moshe Rabeinu to ascend to the top of the mountain, as it is written: “**Hashem descended upon Har Sinai to the top of the mountain; Hashem summoned Moshe to the top of the mountain and Moshe ascended.**” Thus, HKB”H conveyed a definitive message to future generations of talmidei-chachamim. Although, it is essential that they behave with due humility, it is also essential that they display a modicum of “ga’avah.” For only in this manner, will they instill fear and respect in their pupils and be able to teach them not to belittle the honor of the Torah.

At this point, I would like to introduce a precious gem from the esteemed Rabbi Yisrael Spira, the head of the beit-din of Bluzhov, ztz”l, in the sefer Tzvi LaTzaddik. He explains why HKB”H commanded Moshe Rabeinu to warn Yisrael to stay a safe distance away from the mountain (Shemos 19, 12): “והגבלת את העם סביב לאמר, השמרו לכם עלות בהר ונגוע בקצהו, כל הנוגע בהר מות יומת... במשך היובל המה יעלו בהר.” **And you shall set a boundary around it (Har Sinai) for the people, saying, “Take care not to go onto the mountain or touch its edge; whoever touches the mountain will surely die . . . When there is a prolonged blast of the ram’s horn, they will be permitted to go up onto the mountain.”**

He bases his explanation on the fact that a mountain is an elevated place. As such, it reflects arrogance and haughtiness. Therefore, HKB”H warned Yisrael: “**Take care not to go onto the mountain or touch its edge**”—it is imperative to avoid any display or modicum of arrogance. For: “**Whoever touches the mountain will surely die,**” in keeping with the teaching of the Mishnah (Avos 4, 21): “הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד מוציאים את

of sefer Vayikra. Moshe inscribed the word "ויקרא" in both instances but only insisted on modifying the "aleph" here in our parsha. Let us refer to a teaching from the Arizal in Sha'ar HaKavanos (Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbas). He asserts that the miniature "aleph" of "ויקרא" in our parsha signifies that as a consequence of the "cheit ha'eigel," Moshe Rabeinu had to forfeit all but one of the one thousand ("eleph") lights that he received at Matan Torah.

Now, we know that the word "אלף" represents two extremes. If we pronounce it "aleph," it is the smallest of numerals; it equals one. If, however, we pronounce it "eleph," it is a very large number; it is the beginning of the thousands. With this in mind, the Bnei Yissaschar writes (Shabbasos 3, 8) that this is the underlying meaning of the passuk (Devarim 32, 30): "איכה ירדוף אחד אלף—how could one pursue a thousand? In other words, the one can become one thousand and vice-versa.

This clarifies the explanation of the Arizal regarding the miniature "aleph" fantastically. As a normal-sized letter, the "aleph" can allude to אָלף—one thousand. Yet when it is miniaturized, it alludes to its minimal value of one. Now, since, in the aftermath of the "cheit ha'eigel," Moshe Rabeinu only retained one—אֶלֶף—of the one thousand—אָלף—lights he had received, the letter "aleph" appears as a small letter, indicating that his gift had been reduced to the lower representation of the "aleph."

Due to His Extreme Humility Moshe Rabeinu Believed that He Was Responsible for the Cheit HaEigel

To clarify the matter further, let us focus on the following pesukim (Shemos 32, 7): "וידבר ה' אל משה לך רד כי שחת עמך אשר העלית מארץ מצרים, סרו מהר מן הדרך אשר צויתם, עשו להם עגל מסכה ושתחוּו לו ויזבחו לו, ויאמרו אלהיך ישראל אשר העלוך מארץ מצרים." Hashem spoke to Moshe: "Go, descend; for your nation that you have brought up from Mitzrayim has acted corruptly. They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf, prostrated themselves to it and sacrificed to it. And they said, 'This is your god, O Yisrael, which brought you up from the land of Mitzrayim.'"

Rashi comments: "וידבר"—this term denotes harshness . . . "Go, descend" from your greatness. I did not give you greatness except on their account. At that moment, Moshe was banished by decree of the Heavenly Court. "Your nation . . . has acted corruptly": It does not say "the nation has acted corruptly" but rather "your nation," the "Erev Rav" (mixed multitude) whom you accepted of your own volition and converted them, but you did not consult Me. And you said, "It is good that converts should attach themselves to the Shechinah"; they became corrupt and have corrupted others.

Rashi teaches us that HKB"H took Moshe to task on two accounts: Firstly, whatever greatness HKB"H had given him at Matan Torah was solely on account of Yisrael. Hence, when they fell from their lofty status, Moshe had to go down with them. Secondly, that the Erev Rav, whom Moshe had taken into their midst of his own volition, were responsible for corrupting Yisrael. Understood in this light, we can interpret Moshe's remark to HKB"H as follows (ibid. 32, 32): "ועתה אם תשא חטאתם ואתה ואם—now, if You would but bear their sin; but if not, erase me from Your book that You have written. After all, I am responsible for the "cheit ha'eigel," since I brought the Erev Rav into their midst.

With immense joy, this resolves our quandary. On the one hand, Moshe agreed to inscribe the "ויקרא" associated with Matan Torah with a normal-sized "aleph," whereas, due to his extreme humility, he requested permission to inscribe the "ויקרא" in this week's parsha with a miniature "aleph." It is because at Matan Torah, Moshe Rabeinu was privileged to receive all one thousand lights on account of Yisrael. Therefore, he inscribed a normal-sized "aleph" to symbolize that he had received all אָלף lights.

On the other hand, here, in parshas Vayikra, in the aftermath of the "cheit ha'eigel," all but one of the lights had been confiscated from Moshe Rabeinu, and he felt that he was at fault. So, when HKB"H instructed him to write "ויקרא אל משה" with a normal "aleph," he pleaded to inscribe the word "ויקרא" with a miniature "aleph." He wished to signify that by accepting the Erev Rav into Yisrael's midst, he had caused Yisrael to sin and, as a consequence, he deserved to forfeit

the אֶלֶף lights and make do with a single light signified by the small “aleph.”

In conclusion, HKB”H acquiesced to Moshe Rabeinu’s request to inscribe the word “ויקרא” with a miniature “aleph” to emphasize the importance of the midah of “anavah” personified by Moshe Rabeinu. As the Midrash teaches us, this midah is intimately related to the offering of korbanos:

One whose attitude is humble, Scripture regards him as though he brought all the various korbanos, for it states: “The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit.” Yet, at Matan Torah, Moshe inscribed the word “ויקרא” with a normal “aleph” as instructed without protesting. For, at that time, he was privileged to receive all the one thousand lights which HKB”H is destined to return to him at the time of the future geulah—swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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