

VAYIKRA Kohen Levi Yisrael

Rabbi David Gutterman - Origin of names Katz, Segal, etc. kohen and levi origin. Importance of maintaining that yihus.

Vayikra: The First Book of Moses

Do you know any Katz's? Katz is a name that is formed from two Hebrew letters and is an acronym; each letter standing for a separate word. Katz equals Kohein Tzedek which translates as righteous priest. Do you know any Segals, Seigels or Siegels for that matter? Admittedly that marquis would be an interesting law firm, but guess what? That, too, is an acronym and the three Hebrew letters that make up this name stand for S'gan Leviah or, assistant from the Levites. Keep in mind that the Levites were essentially assistants to the priests in the Temple. Chagall, by the way, is a version of this name.

I share with you a story heard from Rabbi Soloveitchik, himself a Levi. The story occurred several years after the war. During the Torah reading a youngish man was called up for the third aliya. Normally, not a bad thing except this time an elderly man who was in the back of the shul was palpably and visibly shaken. This man approached the younger man and rebuked him - but did so choking back tears. The elderly man said to him, "I was in Auschwitz with your father. Your father was a Kohein. Your rightful place is to be called up to the Torah first."

Based upon this incident, Rav Soloveitchik held as a matter of Jewish praxis - though one is not obligated to write one's Hebrew name with reference to family or tribal status, it is advisable to do so. Why? So one's children will know where their ancestors came from.

Why this primer on priestly names? Because this Shabbat the Jewish people begin to read from the third book of Moses called Vayikra, or Leviticus. I'm sure you hear in the latter name the word, Levites. For a rather obvious reason: the bulk of the book deals with the sacred task of the tribe of Levi carrying out their job in the Tabernacle which itself becomes the paradigm for the later Temple service in Jerusalem. The tribe of Levi is made up from both members of the Kohein and Levite families. Or to put this in simpler terms, both the Katz's and Segal's are part of this tribe!

Though Vayikra is the Third book of Moses, historically it was the First book of Moses that was taught to children. Indeed, if you look into the text of the Torah itself, you will notice that the last letter of the first word is written with a small aleph. In a word, it is written in a smaller font. Answers Rabbi Assi in the Midrash: "Let those who are small and pure come and learn first from this book which deals with pure things." (Vayikra Rabba 7:3)

A lovely thought but I dare say one that may not play so well in Peoria today. After all, the parasha deals with the laws of the sacrificial service which may not resonate so readily in the modern world - let alone to the comprehension of children.

Allow me to offer on the altar of speculation a sort of modern Midrash. And if my assumption is correct, we need to teach this book first to our kids - now, more than ever.

At the core of sacrificial service and Temple worship is the sacredness and unique spirituality of Jerusalem. The sacrificial service was only performed at the Temple in Jerusalem. Prayer today, suggests the Talmud, is in place of sacrifices. And toward which direction do we pray? Most people would respond toward the east, the real answer is toward Jerusalem. If we can't physically be with Jerusalem on a daily basis, we are with her spiritually every day.

In other words, under girding and underlying the book of Vayikra, which admittedly deals with themes that are difficult at first blush to grasp – is the notion of the sacred, undeniable, and inviolate connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel in general, and to Jerusalem in particular. Dare I say, a lesson that is worthy of learning and relearning ourselves and teaching and reteaching to our children.

Yesterday, as we were watching the results of the Israeli election to see who would get the first, second and even third aliya -so to speak, let's keep in mind that we all love the Land and her people and pray and yearn for peace.

Shabbat Shalom,
David Leib ben Volf Meir HaKohein

[submitted by Nisson Shulman (HaLevi)]