



**SERMON VAYIKRA:¹
WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, ALEPH?**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 16 March 2019
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 My life basically depends on this notebook.² Everything I need to do, I list in my notebook. Every passing idea I have, I write down in my notebook. Outlines for sermons: in my notebook. Key points from books and articles I read: in my notebook.
- 2 It takes me about two months to fill one of these up. It gets pretty battered and weathered by the end, but that can be rather endearing; it comes everywhere with me and it's a much-used tool. I don't have 'a desk' like a rabbi who has a full-time job, so the blank pages of my notebook are the empty space I need in which to work. I don't think I'm ever more than about eight feet from it, and if I were to lose it, it would be a bit disastrous.
- 3 This particular notebook is made by an American company called Field Notes. Field Notes has a bit of a cult following in the States; four times a year it produces limited-edition notebooks with special covers, and they sell out almost instantly. The Field Notes motto is, "I'm not writing it down to remember it later: I'm writing it down to remember it now."³
- 4 I identify with that motto a lot. I write things out on paper that I know will later need to be typed up onto a computer. When I was preparing this sermon, why didn't I just start with a blank Word document instead of picking up a pen first? There's something about the physicality of paper



that stimulates my brain. Once I've written my to-do list with a pen, I rarely need to look at it again. Just the act of putting the words into a permanent form – a form that can't just be deleted at the touch of a button – helps seal them into my mind.

- 5 The ways in which we write can often tell us just as much as the actual content of what is written. The production of a Torah scroll is a monumental feat, which can take a highly-trained scribe a year or more to complete. It's not just a simple matter of copying out the words. The ink has to be specially brewed; there are a whole host of rules regarding the writing of God's name; and then there are the scribal oddities. Little touches that emphasise or mark out particular words and letters, for often unclear reasons.
- 6 One of the most conspicuous scribal oddities comes right at the beginning of this week's parashah: the very first word of the Book of Leviticus is ויקרא – ויקרא אל־משה, and God called out to Moses. ויקרא is spelt, in Hebrew, vav-yud-kuf-resh-aleph. But the aleph is written in teeny-tiny handwriting. It's far smaller than the rest of the word.
- 7 Why? We don't really know. It's one of those Jewish traditions for which there are lots of different explanations, and for which the true reason may be any of them in combination, or maybe none of them.
- 8 One of the explanations comes from the medieval Rabbi Jacob ben-Asher. His commentary on the Torah, the *Ba'al haTurim*, is a somewhat playful text that delights in finding patterns not obviously related to sense or meaning of the text – for instance, taking the first letter of each word in a verse, and putting them together to form a new word. Is this what the



Torah's original author or authors intended? Maybe not. But once again, the ways in which we write can often tell us just as much as the actual content of what is written.

- 9 The *Ba'al haTurim* addresses the teeny-tiny aleph as follows:⁴ “Moses was both great and humble. When writing this verse, he only wanted to write ‘ויקר אל־משה’ [leaving out the aleph, which would result in the sentence ‘God had a chance meeting with Moses’, rather than ‘God singled out Moses’]. But the Holy One, ever to be blessed, told him to write it with the aleph: in reply, Moses agreed to write the aleph... but, on account of his humility, he wrote it smaller than the rest of the word.”
- 10 Is this little story genuinely the reason for the scribal tradition of a small aleph? Common sense tells us that it almost certainly isn't. The *Ba'al haTurim* was compiled in the 13th century, maybe 1,000 years after the scribal traditions of the Torah scroll became standardised. No doubt Rabbi Jacob ben-Asher didn't just invent the tale of Moses's humility – he'll have learned it from his teachers – but the chances of that particular narrative being the specific, factual explanation for the ancient scribes having written the first word of Leviticus the way they do are remote.
- 11 If his explanation is inaccurate, should we ignore it? Again, I don't think so. Because it's not actually the scribes' choice. They no longer own the text. They stopped owning it as soon as their ink dried.
- 12 There is a right answer. As a matter of psychobiological fact, at the time of writing, in the scribes' minds, they will have had a reason for writing a small aleph. (At least, they probably will; it's theoretically possible that it



was an error – a sloppy aleph – that was incorporated into the chain of tradition.)

- 13 But they didn't deign to tell us their reason so we're not bound by it. We're free to adopt the *Ba'al haTurim's* explanation, if it moves us and helps us derive a message valuable to our lives. Or we can come up with our own hypotheses if they move us more. The ancient scribes left us a trail of breadcrumbs with nothing obvious at its end. We may, therefore, imagine the ending that we choose to produce the outcome we need.
- 14 Professor Michael Fishbane has written that the interplay between the composers and readers of Jewish literature is a key part of the Jewish tradition: "The interpreter and the text interpenetrate in dynamic ways: the individual finding that the layers of his or her deepest self have been textualised by study, so that the sacred texts provide a new language for ongoing life experience and inspiration; whereas, in him or her, the text reveals itself as marked by the accumulated readings of its many seekers and learners. Thus its ancient and enduring truths now speak through the spirit and breath of its latter-day interpreters."⁵
- 15 I plan my sermons with a pen and paper because I think I create better material in that way. I interact with my notebook as a creative partner, and we work with each other to produce, jointly, a piece of writing which is of higher quality than it would be if I worked alone with the cold and lifeless Microsoft Word.
- 16 So too is the Torah my creative partner. It inspires, teaches and nurtures, but not actively: that process takes place within the minds of each reader. Even a somewhat tiresome portion like Vayikra, with its endless lists and



its penchant for mutilating animals, can – when we apply our minds to it – provide us with food for thought.

- 17 May the words of Torah continue to inspire, teach and nurture us for all our days... and may our wonderful, Divinely-created minds continue to rejuvenate and invigorate and regenerate the words of Torah. Kein y’hi ratzon: may this be God’s will.

Check against delivery.

GW 16.03.19

¹ Leviticus 1:1-13

² If you were there when I delivered this, you’d have seen me holding up an actual notebook. If you weren’t, then you’ll just have to imagine it – but that shouldn’t be difficult. Just think of me holding up a notebook and you’ll probably have an idea of what it looked like.

³ Deborah L Cohen. ‘Field Notes creates demand for nostalgic notepads’, *Reuters* (1 December 2010): < <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-column-cohen-fieldnotes/field-notes-creates-demand-for-nostalgic-notepads-idUSTRE6B048A20101201>>

⁴ *Ba’al haTurim* on Leviticus 1:1

⁵ Michael Fishbane (ed). *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2002): ‘Introduction’, page xxxii.