



## VAYIKRA

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How Our Youth Can Change the World

March 17, 2018

## WHEN EVERY WORD COUNTS ...

### HOW ACCOUNTABLE SHOULD WE BE?

#### ABSTRACT

One of the biggest stories – and surprises – of our time was demonstrated just this week, when an approximate one million students, from kindergartners through high-school seniors, took to the streets demanding action be taken to prevent violence in the schools. There is a tremendous lesson – and power – in this.

We'll call it the youth revolution.

What is it about the young that makes them so idealistic and so fearless? And what can we learn from them, especially from their ability to forever alter mountains of power that just a while ago seemed unmovable?

People often wonder: “What can I – one single individual – do to have any serious impact on the future? I am after all only one small person amidst a sea of billions!”

The answer lays in this week's Torah chapter – which sandwiches and connects Purim and Passover.

What link can we make between the two? What should be our focus, as we begin to read the third book of the Torah – the Book of Leviticus otherwise known as *Vayikra*?

The answer: our children.

Children played an important role in Purim: Mordechai first turned to the children when the Jewish people were faced with extermination. Their simple and pure advice infused Mordechai with hope and joy, and changed the entire course of events.

Children will play the starring role at Passover.

And they are the key to the first Torah reading in the Book of Leviticus, which captures the secret power of youth. As the Midrash teaches, “Why do the young commence [the study of Torah] with the Book of Leviticus? Surely, it is because the young are pure, and the korbanot (“sacrifices”) are pure. So let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.” Indeed, the Sefer Chasidim describes the custom of placing the Book of Leviticus in the crib near a baby's head when he is named at his circumcision.

Adults are meant to be (or so we're told) smarter than children. But at times, when we speak with our children we surprisingly discover that their wisdom often surpasses our own.

This sermon examines how the purity of youth – unadulterated by the cynicism of material life – has the power to change worlds. And us.

## 1. From the Mouth of Babes

A young boy enters a barber shop and the barber whispers to his customer, “This is the dumbest kid in the world. Watch while I prove it to you.”

The barber puts a dollar bill in one hand and two quarters in the other, then calls the boy over and asks, “Which do you want, son?” The boy takes the quarters and leaves.

“What did I tell you?” said the barber. “That kid never learns!”

Later, when the customer leaves, he sees the same young boy coming out of the ice cream store. “Hey, son! May I ask you a question? Why did you take the quarters instead of the dollar bill?” The boy licked his cone and replied, “Because the day I take the dollar, the game is over!”

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## 2. The Youth Revolution

One of the biggest stories – and surprises – of our time was demonstrated just this week, when an approximate one million students, from kindergartners through high-school seniors, took to the streets demanding action be taken to prevent violence in the schools. There is a tremendous lesson – and power – in this.

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What is it about the young that makes them so idealistic and so fearless? And what can we learn from them, especially from their ability to forever alter mountains of power that just a while ago seemed unmovable?

## 3. A Grandmother’s Tale

A grandmother told me this story. Not some tottering biddy but a youthful, with-it, computer-savvy grandmother. After years of relying on her Blackberry Cell Phone, she decided to upgrade to the Apple Iphone.

She dutifully downloaded the 200+ page instruction booklet and started studying the thing. Days later she was merely frustrated. She decided to stick with her Blackberry and turn this new animal to her ten-year-old grandson. Within hours – and I repeat, within hours – he knew how to work it. He did not need a 200+ page instruction booklet. He merely intuited what to do with this device designed for the young ... or, the young at heart.

Why am I telling you this ... because I just upgraded to the Iphone X?

No. Just to tell you that it is a brave new world out there – and it belongs to the young.

## 4. Accountability for Every Word

But it always has, hasn't it?

In 1960s, just as the hippie generation was waking up in America, Shabtai Zusha Zimmerman, aka Bob Dylan, recorded the classic *The Times They are A-Changin'*.

This song became the hymn of the young demonstrators who preached love and peace and challenged the military establishment, demanding a voice in the future of their country. This song resonates to this day:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land  
And don't criticize what you can't understand  
For your children are beyond your command.  
Your old road is rapidly aging.  
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin'.

What is it about the young that makes them so eager for change, for a revolution – as we have seen in the 60s and 70s in America, in the late 80s in China (especially at Tiananmen Square) and more recently in the Middle East – and now in this country as they rise up across this land demanding safer schools?

What makes the young so idealistic and so fearless? From where do they derive their vigor and intensity?

The Torah provides the answer. The young are more innocent than adults who have been soured by life experiences. Because they have less to lose and protect (materially speaking), their hearts can be totally devoted to their principles. Thus, they exhibit a more pure and unadulterated faith. (Note that word *un-adult-erated!* ) They truly believe that justice will prevail over injustice, that good will win over evil.

## 5. Story from the Midrash

The Midrash<sup>1</sup> tells that when Mordechai (the hero of the Purim story which we read just two weeks ago) learned that a plot had been hatched to exterminate the Jews of Persia, he sought guidance from the young.

In this extreme period of crisis, the eyes of every Jew in the region focused on their wise leader Mordechai, wondering what his response would be. Remarkably, upon becoming aware of this grave threat, Mordechai's

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Esther Rabba 7:17.

first act was to query three young Jewish students (who had a fraction of his vast Torah knowledge) as they were returning home from school. He asked them simply: “What did you learn today?”

The first student quoted the Book of Proverbs: “Do not fear sudden terror or the holocaust of the evil when it comes.”<sup>2</sup>

The second student quoted the Book of Isaiah: “Plan a conspiracy, and it will be annulled. Speak your piece, but it shall not stand, for G-d is with us.”<sup>3</sup>

The third one quoted G-d’s promise (also from the Book of Isaiah) “Even until your old age, I remain unchanged. Even until you turn gray, I shall endure. I created you, and I shall carry you. I shall endure and rescue you.”<sup>4</sup>

“Upon hearing these words,” the Midrash concludes, “Mordechai smiled and ecstatically rejoiced.” When Haman, who was observing this interaction, asked him “Why are you so happy?” Mordechai replied: “I rejoice in the good news the young have brought us, that we should not fear the evil plot you have conspired against us.”

This so infuriated Haman that he immediately vowed: “I will strike the young first!” Haman recognized the power of the youth... but to no avail. The young would bring him down. And that was why Mordechai was so elated.

Mordechai saw that their pure hearts were full of faith and confidence that G-d will protect them and abolish any evil plot.

## 6. The Calling

This week we begin reading book three of the Five Books of Moses, which in English is called Leviticus (referring to the offerings brought in the Sanctuary by the Kohanim, a priestly class of the tribe of Levi). In Hebrew it is called *Vayikra* (from the first phrase of the book “And He called”); thus *Vayikra* could be loosely translated as “the Calling.”

What is *Vayikra* calling us to do? To come close – *l’karev* – to G-d, the root of the word *korban* or “offering,” which is the main vehicle it describes for achieving this.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 3:25.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 8:10.

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 46:4. (These three verses, incidentally, conclude traditional morning prayers in Jewish liturgy.)

<sup>5</sup> As the verse continues: Adam ki yakriv me’kem korban l’Hashem, “When you, Man, will come close and offer yourself to G-d...”

As esoteric or complicated the Book of Leviticus and its laws of offerings might sound to us, the Talmudic sages considered this book basic education, and indeed, they followed an established custom<sup>6</sup> of using it as the beginning a child's Torah study. They are quoted as saying:

“Why do the young commence [the study of Torah] with the Book of Leviticus? Surely, it is because the young are pure, and the *korbanot* (“offerings”) are pure. So let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure.”<sup>7</sup>

The underlying message in all this is the purity of our young, and the importance of cultivating that purity.

## 7. What is Purity?

What is purity?

Often, the best way to understand a concept is by examining its converse.

Ask yourself: How sacred does your life feel? How pure are your activities? How indispensable do you think you are?

We live in a world in which we are being taught that people are essentially selfish creatures, driven by self-interest.

Since the Darwinian-Freudian model of life pervades every aspect of our lives, our psyches are being continuously drilled with the message that we are narcissistic beasts at heart. When the driving ethos of all creatures is “survival of the fittest,” then natural selection basically renders every human virtue, every noble act – everything we hold dear – as a method for billion-year-old bacteria to adapt and survive.

Purity – that's for the naïve child, the foolish youthful idealist unaware of man's egocentricity, cruelty and the harshness of existence. The real world is one in which “dog eats dog,” and if you don't protect yourself, the predators lurking everywhere will get you.

Is there such a thing as a good man – a pure spirit?

The so-called “realists” say no. They cynically argue that goodness and purity are for the fools or the dreamers. They would never proclaim: “Let the pure come and engage in the pure.”

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<sup>6</sup> Some find evidence of this practice in Rabbi Judah's permission to prepare scrolls, for use by children, in which the first five chapters of Genesis and the first eight chapters of Leviticus were written. See Gittin 60a, Mesechta Soferim 5:9. In addition, the first piece of Torah that Rabbi Akiva studied after he had mastered the alef-bet was from Leviticus. See Abot d'Rabbi Nathan 6:2.

<sup>7</sup> *Leviticus Rabba* 7:3. *Tanchuma Tzav* 14. Cited in *Kol Bo* 74. *Shach Yoreh Deah* 245:8.

We cannot help but marvel at the stark contrast of this gentle description of our young (as the pure engaged in the pure) with the message (often emanating from the hallowed halls of science) that is inundating our homes, schools and media – that our lives lack intrinsic value, and that all the things we hold precious are simply crafty tools of survival.

## 8. The Side-Effect

The side-effect of such a scientific approach is certain (and not theoretical): It does not leave us empowered. Indeed, it leaves us feeling weak, malleable, manipulated, controlled by forces outside of our choices, fearful, vulnerable and competing for survival with our own neighbors and friends. In one word: insignificant.

It trivializes our choices and render our noblest features as essentially selfish efforts to survive at all costs.

Does any of that resonate with you?

I hope not.

What truly resonates with me is the very opposite – the sense that somewhere deep inside all of us (even in the most hardened, jaded, darkened and distorted psyches) lies something pure and untouched, and if it ever has a chance to be ignited, it has the power to change the world.

## 9. What is Purity? (Continued)

Which brings us back to the question we have yet to answer: What is purity?

Purity means an essential state of being, before it assumes any superimposed features. Purity is a state that is unpolled by human devices and man-made institutions. It's hard to describe purity with our conventional language which itself is far from pure – for language reflects, and is an outgrowth of, the reality around us. To appreciate purity we need to access a place that is beyond conventional experiences.

The face of a newborn child, the simple flower, the teardrop – any force in life that is untouched by humans – expresses purity.

Raw material existence, divorced of spirit, is not pure, nor is it real. Naked materialism is but a surface layer of existence, shrouding the life force within.

Purity is thus the soul – as we say in traditional morning prayers: “The soul that You have given me is pure.” In its essential form, every soul is pure. Then the soul begins a journey (as the prayer continues): “You have created it, You have shaped it, You have breathed it into me, and You protect it within me.” (Note that the prayer

speaks of protection, because once the pure soul enters an impure world it needs all the protection it can get.)

Children/the young are pure – they express the purest state of being, like freshly fallen snow, untouched, pristine, innocent.

We look at them, and we see purity. We see our own quintessence – how we are at our best and our purest, unadulterated and unvarnished. And we must respect it – for in the purity of our youth lies our salvation.

## 10. The Festival of the Child

Indeed, in just a week, we will be celebrating our salvation from Egyptian bondage. And Passover is nothing short of the “Festival of the Child.”

This holiday totally orbits around our children!

The Hebrew word *Haggadah* means “the Telling,” and it is based on a phrase from the Book of Exodus *v'bigadito l'vincho* (“and you shall tell your child”)<sup>8</sup>. This telling is meant to be generated through the child’s questions.<sup>9</sup>

In Jewish homes across the world, young children begin the Passover *Seder* by asking the famous Four Questions beginning with: “Why is this night different than other nights?”

And then come the four children: “the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the one who does not know how to ask.”

Depending on how (and if) the son articulates his question, the Torah offers four different approaches to explaining the message of the festival and the significance of our freedom.

We can thus call Passover “the Festival of the Child,” because children embody freedom, something most of us are lacking on a regular basis. (When did you last experience freedom?)

For many of us, burdened by our jobs, our familial and social responsibilities, and the other entanglements of life, freedom seems a rare bird, as elusive as it beautiful. We want it, we need it, yet how do we achieve it?

But look at the children around you ... observe them at play, immersed in a favorite book, asleep and smiling at their dreams ... assured that their parents will feed them, protect them, and worry about all that needs worrying about. Having no cares in the world, the children are free – free to grow and develop, free to enjoy all the joys and possibilities of life.

This is why Passover, the festival of freedom, is so much the Festival of the Child. For it is the child who evokes in us the realization that we, too, are children of G-d, and are thus inherently and eternally free.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 13:8.

<sup>9</sup> As Exodus 13:14 also advises: “When your child will ask you ... you shall tell him.” See as well Deuteronomy 6:20 and Exodus 12:26.



It is the child who opens our eyes to the ultimate significance of Passover – that in taking us out of Egypt to make us his Chosen People, G-d has liberated us of all enslavement and subjugation for all time.

The child is thus the most important participant at the Passover *Seder*. Many of the *Seder* customs are specifically designed to mystify the child, to stimulate his curiosity, to compel him to ask questions. And, on Passover, we want to enter the child's mind, to view reality from his or her perspective. For how else can we taste freedom?

## 11. Call to Action

So as we begin reading the Book of Leviticus, let us call out to our pure and innocent ones: “Let the pure come and engage in the study of the pure!”

And as we approach Passover, let us listen to our youth recite to us holy words of faith and trust in the One Above ... let them give us hope and confidence in the future.

Let us all speak with our children. Let us elicit from them their purity and their innocence.

When you come home from work, or before putting your children to sleep, or upon awakening – any time you can find – ask your children: “What did you learn today?” You may be surprised to hear what they say...

As well, let us all resolve to reach out and speak with the youth in our community. Let us ask them “What did you learn today?” And let us allow them to speak words of truth.

And finally, let us all seek to educate our children with passion and vivacity in the timeless values of Judaism. So that they can use their purity to lead the way.

## 12. Change a Child: Change the World!

People often wonder: “What can I – one single individual – do to have any serious impact on the future? I am after all only one small person amidst a sea of billions!”

My dear friends the answer is contained in this week's Torah chapter – which sandwiches and connects Purim and Passover.

You want to change the world? Change a child.

As we travel from Purim to Passover, the theme of children jumps out at us: First on Purim, then on Passover. And never more so in this week's Parsha, which focuses on the purity of children, helping prepare us for addressing our children this Passover.

What single act can you do right now to change the world forever?

Listen and speak to your children. Hear their innocence. Respond to their purity. Speak to their hearts and souls.

What you will get in return is far greater than what you will be giving.

As the prophet Malachi concludes his book<sup>10</sup>: “He will turn the hearts of the parents back through the children.”  
Amen.

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