

# The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

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## Parashat Vayikra

### How Does Vayikra's Small Alef Teach that the Land of Israel is Designated for Revelation?

#### Why Did the Teenager Cry so Profusely When Leaving the Land of Israel?

I'll never forget it. Once, as I was boarding a flight for my annual international speaking tour, I passed a girl who looked like a typical gap-year student – denim skirt, casual T-shirt stamped with a bold quote. But it wasn't her appearance that caught my attention. It was the sound of her loud, heartfelt sobs and the stream of sincere tears down her cheeks. I paused and asked gently, "Why are you crying?" offering her a tissue. "I'm leaving Israel – I'm leaving *Eretz Yisrael!* This is the saddest moment of my life. How can I be away from the Land of Israel?" she cried through her tears. As much as I wanted to engage in a deeper conversation with this girl, I had to move along – the line behind me was pressing forward. But even after I found my seat and recited the prayer for a safe air travel, I couldn't stop thinking about the girl who cried so profusely because of leaving the Land of Israel. Her weeping was more than emotional; it was soulful. I'm sure if I had asked her to explain her deep attachment to Israel, she would've struggled to articulate it. Her connection was beyond explanation – it radiated from the depth of her Jewish soul. And perhaps her tears have etched into my memory so vividly because I feel the same way. Every time I leave Israel – even for a short visit to honor my parents – it feels like a murky cloud dulls my inner light. I sense myself drifting from my spiritual center, from the place where I feel most at home in my soul. Whereas some of my relatives fear visiting Israel, I always feel safest here, where the Divine Presence is near. Whenever I travel abroad, I remind myself of the Talmudic promise: "Those on the path to perform a mitzvah are not susceptible to harm" (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 8a*). Still, I count the days until I return. And when I do, the moment the plane's wheels touch the holy soil, and we break into applause, I am overcome by the quiet but unmistakable feeling of coming home. The holiness of the land touches me to tears of return.

#### Why is the Land of Israel the Only Place Where Prophecy Blossoms?

What does my spiritual homecoming have to do with *Parashat Vayikra*? I must admit that it is challenging to tie the Torah portions that don't mention the land of Israel directly to the Land of Israel. We need to dig beyond the surface to discover the deeper underlying connections.

*Parashat Vayikra* opens with Hashem addressing Moshe after the Mishkan had been completed,

**סַפֵּר וַיִּקְרָא פֶּרֶק אֶת פְּסוּקֵי אֵל וַיִּקְרָא אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:**

"Then He called to Moshe, and Hashem spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying" (*Vayikra 1:1*).

The first word of this verse **וַיִּקְרָא**/*Vayikra* – "He called," contains an unusual scribal deviation – it is written with a small, diminished **א**/*alef*. The midrash and commentaries offer various explanations, many of which highlight Moshe's humility, which we will address further on. Yet this small *alef* also carries a profound message about the nature of revelation – and the role of *Eretz Yisrael* as the spiritual epicenter of that calling. The opening of *Vayikra* marks the moment when Hashem speaks to Moshe not from atop Mount Sinai, but from within the Mishkan. This shift in setting underscores the transition from a one-time, grand national revelation at Sinai to an ongoing, intimate relationship rooted in sacred space. The Shechinah did not dwell in the Mishkan while the people wandered aimlessly. It began once the Mishkan was erected, oriented toward entry into the Promised Land. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi makes a powerful claim: prophecy is bound to the Land of Israel. "But it is not possible for this unique spiritual faculty to reach its

divine objective apart from this place, just as a vineyard cannot thrive outside its specific mountain soil.” He teaches that no one received prophecy except *in* the Land or *for the sake of* the Land. Avraham received prophecy in order to travel there. Even the exceptions – Yechezkel and Daniel, for example – experienced prophetic visions *because* of the presence of the Shechinah, which had been exiled with them, having once resided in the First Temple of Jerusalem. Thus, the unique spiritual potential of the Chosen People – the heart of humanity – to prophesy can only be fully actualized and blossom within the Holy Land. The land of Israel is referred to as “before Hashem,” about which it is said: “The eyes of Hashem your G-d are upon it always” (*Devarim* 11:12; *The Kuzari* 2:12-14).

### **How is the Small Alef a Sign of Moshe’s Humility?**

The connection between the small *alef* and the significance of the Land of Israel can be understood through the importance of humility and submission to G-d’s will, as a prerequisite for upholding the sanctity essential for dwelling in Eretz Yisrael, where the Shechinah is most manifest. By humbling ourselves, we make room within to invite the Shechinah to dwell. Rashi explains that the small *alef* in the word *Vayikra* signifies Moshe’s modesty; unlike Bilam, to whom G-d “happened upon” (*vayikar*), implying a casual encounter, Hashem “called” (*vayikra*) Moshe, indicating a deliberate and affectionate communication. Moshe, in his humility, wished to downplay this distinction represented by the *alef*. Therefore, he reduced the size of the *alef*. When Moshe was commanded to write the word *Vayikra*, he objected. He did not want to write this word in a way that showed that he had a close relationship with Hashem. Moshe, as the most modest man on earth, did not want to convey his prophecy as being higher than Bilam’s. Even when Hashem forced him to write *Vayikra* and not *vayikar*, Moshe did so only with a small *alef*, so as not to draw attention to his special relationship with Hashem (Ba’al Turim, *Vayikra* 1:1). The Kotzker Rebbe explains an enigmatic Midrasic comment. The verse states that Moshe “did not know that his face was shining” (*Shemot* 34:30). Moshe had to cover his face to conceal this overpowering light for the sake of teaching his people. Moshe’s face shone because of the extra ink left over from writing the Sefer Torah. The luminescence of Moshe’s face came from the ink that Moshe left over when he chose to write the word *Vayikra* with a small *alef*. That ‘leftover ink,’ therefore, represents Moshe’s humility (The Midrash Tanchuma, *Parashat Ki Tisa* 37). This aspect of humility was what made Moshe so holy that his face reflected the celestial light of the Shechinah, making it impossible to behold him with human eyes.

### **How is the Land of Israel Designated for Ultimate Intimacy with Hashem?**

From the very beginning of creation, *Eretz Yisrael* is the land “before Hashem” – the place where divine presence is most tangibly revealed, and where humankind’s mission to connect with the divine reaches its fullest expression. It is no coincidence that Cain and Hevel fought over it, or that Yitzchak and Yishmael, Ya’acov and Esav, all contended over who would inherit this holy ground. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi explains that this is not merely a geographic conflict but a spiritual one – a struggle over who will be attached to the divine purpose and who will fall away like a discarded husk (*The Kuzari* 1:95). Although the desert experience conveyed the most intimate connection with Hashem, who guided the Israelites with His Clouds of Glory and fed them manna from heaven, nevertheless, the *Zohar* teaches us that no matter how good it is in *Chutz LaAretz* – even from a spiritual standpoint – something is lacking, for true Jewish perfection can only be attained in The Land of Israel! Nowadays, until October 7, many Jews have enjoyed tranquil spiritual lives in the diaspora, with bursting Jewish communities and Torah institutions. Yet despite the spiritual intimacy of the Israelites during the desert wandering, their existence was considered imperfect, simply because it was still outside of Israel. We learn this from the *Zohar* that puts the entire Book of *VaYikra* in perspective, by explaining the small *alef* of *Vayikra* most astoundingly: Why is there a small *alef*? Because this “calling” was

imperfect. Why so? For it took place in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and in a foreign land, because true perfection can only be found in the Land of Israel (*Tosafot HaZohar* 1, quoted in *Itturei Torah*, vol. 3, p. 7; cited by Rabbi Moshe D. Lichtman, *Vayikra and the Land of Israel*). The diminished *alef* at the beginning of *Parashat Vayikra* alludes to the truth that only by serving Hashem in His Chosen Land can we attain our ultimate goal.

### **The Soil Where Divine Communication Blossoms**

This *Zohar* transforms how we read the first verse of *Vayikra* which sets the tone for the entire book of *Vayikra*. The small *alef* doesn't only reflect Moshe's humility – it whispers a truth about the Land of Israel. Though hidden and subtle, Eretz Yisrael is the soil in which divine communication blossoms. Even the *Vayikra*, the “calling,” is specific to the Holy Land. Just as prophecy cannot flourish outside the Land, the highest expression of the *Mishkan* – the *Beit Hamikdash* could not be established elsewhere. The *Shechinah* rests only where Hashem has chosen – in the land uniquely fit for revelation. Thus, the small *alef* of *Vayikra* is not a diminishment – it is a distillation. It represents the concentrated holiness of a place uniquely chosen to carry divine presence. The *Midrash* affirms this by listing the times the word “*Li*” (to Me) appears – in connection with the *Kohanim*, the *Levi'im*, Eretz Yisrael, Jerusalem, the *Beit Hamikdash*, *korbanot*, and even prophecy itself. Wherever the Torah says “*Li*,” that entity or place is bound to Hashem for eternity – in this world and the next (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 2:2). May we merit to live in the Land of Israel not merely as an inheritance of the past, but as the present and future landscape of our divine calling – the very ground of redemption and closeness to Hashem. May we merit to experience the return of prophecy in the land of divine revelation!