

## Vayikra

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 3/17/18

When our very proud bat mitzvah girl, Elyse, got her bat mitzvah date she was super excited. But then, when she read her Torah portion in English, well, let's just say, "not as much." And you can understand why. And Elyse, you did a great job interpreting this portion for us today. But clearly this not as exciting as the Splitting of the Red Sea, as intriguing as Moses at the Burning Bush, or as awesome as the Revelation at Sinai. No, Va-Yikrah is about sacrifices, most of which involved killing animals and putting them on an altar. So it might surprise you to learn that for many generations there has been a custom to begin a child's learning of Chumash with this very Torah portion, Vayikra, (which The Rabbis call Torat Kohanim.) The explanation as to why is found as far back as the midrash known as Yalkut Shimoni, written more than 700 years ago. "Why do young children start with Torat Kohanim?" the midrash asks. "Let them start with Bereisheet, with Genesis; start at the beginning of the Torah!" But the Midrash explains, "Since the korbanot (the sacrifices) are pure and the children are pure, let the pure come and deal with the pure."

So beautiful... I think what the midrash means is that kids are "pure" in that they lack the cynicism, the skepticism, and preconceived ideas that accrue over time. So the midrash teaches: Let them begin with a blank slate and learn that the service of Gd and the pursuit of Goodness start with a system of worship that involves rules and ritual. In other words, let them learn the "what" before they start asking the "why." And you know, that's a pretty sound pedagogic method. You get kids to do the right thing because it is the right thing, and as they mature they can ask, and you can explain, the "Whys."

Very soon the Jewish global classroom will open; not in schools, but in Jewish homes around the globe as we sit down at the seder table. And following that same pedagogic method, we show the kids the "what," and THEN we explain the "why." And nowhere is that method more clearly delineated than in the section known as the "Four Sons" or the "Four Children." Now if your house was like mine, there was always a pregnant pause when we came to the Four Children. "The Wise Child?" OK, that's an easy one to pick. Who doesn't want that part? But how can you look around the table and say, "Now which one is a Rasha, "Wicked" one? Which one is Simple one and which is the one who cannot ask the questions? That can really make for some uncomfortable moments, for sure. But I have a theory, based on this model from VaYikrah, that works for me, and I hope that it will for you, too.

For me, they are not four children, per se, but rather four stages in our intellectual and spiritual development. Let me explain: Like the young students who start with VaYikrah, we all begin as "the child who cannot ask," we know next to nothing. We are plain, simple and pure, and even naive. Then we become the student, the child who accepts simple answers at face value. Our eyes and our minds are wide open. Then, as we learn and experience more, we begin to ask pointed questions, to challenge assumptions, to stake our ground. We all rebel a bit. We learn to push back, we may become less accepting, less patient of those who do not hold our same opinions; in other words, we become a bit of the Rasha. But then, eventually, hopefully, we end up being like the Wise Child; the one who can integrate different ideas to form more nuanced and informed opinions. We learn to learn from all our experiences. We come to understand ourselves more, and in the process become more accepting of others. We become more confident in who we are, and at the same time, more willing to learn.

This wisdom is clearly more than just book learning. Being smart and being wise are not the same thing. Smart people focus on absorbing as much knowledge as possible and showing the world that they're more clever than others; they kind of stay in the Rasha stage. But wise people also find knowledge within and aren't so focused on showing it off, or challenging simply for the sake of proving that they are more right than the other person. Wise people learn from listening; they are humble, they are accepting of others who do not share their opinions. There is a serenity that comes from self-acceptance and with it a willingness to listen. Wise people understand that the purity of spirit with which they are born can never truly be taken from them. Wise people understand that while they may not be able to control what happens to them, they can learn to control their response and shape their own thought life. Wise people realize that life learning never stops, even in trying circumstance. Wise people have an inner strength that brings peace.

Of course, we all have a bit of all four children in us. There is a beauty in being a blank slate; of having a willful naiveté. And sometimes we need to understand life for what it is, like the simple child. Facts matter. Still, sometimes we also have to push and ask the tough questions, to challenge the status quo, to push the conversation forward... But when all is said and done, it is those who acquire wisdom who truly know peace. And that is what I hope for all of you, peace in your heart and serenity deep in your soul. A willingness to live and to learn from every moment in our lives. "Teach us to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom," said King David. School is indeed in session each and every day, so let us approach the Feast of Freedom looking to learn from others and to share our wisdom as we come together once more.