

Romemu Dvar Torah March 18, 2016

Such an awesome thing to be with you here tonight. Only a few days before the High Holidays. Some of you laughed, but you were scared, right? Come on, some of you were scared.

Maybe tickets, they're going to be selling tickets for a kind of event this coming Wednesday night. It's not Yom Kippur this Wednesday night, but the holiday of Purim. Holiday of Purim is coming up, and of course, you know, as soon as I say it's the High Holidays and Purim is around the corner, you're thinking, there's no connection between Purim and Yom Kippur.

There's nothing like Yom Kippur. It's a holiday. It's all about fasting and atonement, right? That much we know.

It's solemn and it's contemplative. We think about our death, our mortality. We wear a white kittel to imitate these angels.

We're in shul all day. It's all kadosh, all holy. It's rooted in Torah, in the Bible.

It has to do with sacrificial elements, like Sir Lazazel, the scapegoat, and the other goat that was... All of that, it's all Yom Kippur. Purim, on the other hand, Purim is all masks. It's all fun.

It's all funny hats. Maybe a little bit of, you know, little schnapps, a little bit of, you know, something to let you soften up. Purim's got hamantaschen.

They even have their own cookie on Purim. It's not in the temple at all. It's outside the temple.

It takes place in Persia. What's Purim have to do with Yom Kippur? And to make things even more intense, Purim is a holiday in which there is a heroine named Esther, whose name means to be concealed, to be hidden. And God's name doesn't appear once in the holy book associated with the holiday of Purim.

It is anything but a Yom Kippur kind of day. Nonetheless, in the 13th century, there was a great mystical book called the Zohar that made a radical assertion. It asserted that on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is actually only Yom Kippurim.

The day Yom Kippurim is Yom Kippurim. The holiest and most spiritual holiday in the Jewish calendar is only like Purim, or as some read it, as almost as good as Purim, but not quite. What a wild idea.

Yom Kippurim, a transcendent day of fasting, repentance, is less holy than a day of mass and merriment, of revelry and repast. What is going on? Yom Kippur and the world of Purim don't just collide in that Zohar, but they collide tomorrow morning in every synagogue around the world, and right here in good ol' Romemu. Yom Kippur and the world of Purim will collide when we begin reading the third book of the Torah, Vayikra, or Leviticus.

Vayikra, everyone, is all about order. Ask Mary Douglas. It's all about bringing things that are chaotic into neat and tidy places like that little book that made its way out of the New York Times best-selling list.

That's Leviticus, right? Vayikra is the Avodah. It's about tabernacle. It's about precision.

It's about distinction. It's about the minutia. That's Leviticus.

In a way, it's kind of the Felix Unger of the Torah. Bum-pa-bum-pa-bum-pa-bum-pa-bum-pa-bum. You know you're dating yourself when half of the audience knows that, and the rest are going, no idea what that is.

YouTube it. YouTube Ad Kabul, and you'll know what that is. The Latin name for the book of Vayikra is Leviticus, because the Latin name captures the Levitical priorities.

The Levites and the priests were in charge of every little detail. Leviticus. But that's not the word used for the book of Leviticus.

It's Vayikra. Vayikra, which means, and he called him. Vayikra, and he called him.

And God called whom? God called Moshe. And he, Vayikra, and he called Moshe. That very first word, which becomes the word for the third book of the Torah.

It's a strangely written word. First of all, why would God need to call Moshe? Just speak to Moshe. What is it that the redundancy of Vayikra, Vayidaber, and then he spoke? Vayikra means, and he called.

Why the need for the call? Question number one. Number two, that if one opens up a Torah tomorrow morning, that very word, which becomes the word of the third book, the name, the title, is written with a very strange orthographic font. The word Vayikra, Vayikra, Vav Yud Kuf Resh Aleph.

Vayikra, and he called. The last letter is a Aleph Ze'era. It is a small letter Aleph.

A font size like six. Only a few of those appear in the Torah. And ostensibly, that diminution of that letter creates almost two words.

Instead of Vayikra, and he called, it becomes Vicar Aleph. What is Vicar Aleph mean? Two meanings. One, Vicar Aleph means the word Vicar is precious.

Honorable. Vicar Aleph means to honor or to cherish that little Aleph. And the second meaning of that Vicar, those four first letters, is from the word Mikre in Hebrew, which means random, chance.

Mikre, Layla, Keri. Vicar Aleph means randomness. And the letter Aleph in all places represents unity or one.

A symbol of that prior togetherness. Vicar Aleph is honor the Aleph. Wear the mask, but don't forget what's behind it.

Honor the Aleph and search for it begins tomorrow morning's reading of the Book of Order. Yom Kippur isn't messy. And even if everything that happened in the Temple was messy, it's still not a messy book.

And Yom Kippur is not a messy day. It was predictable. It had certain mechanics.

It was Newtonian. It was dependable. The whole book is like that.

And then it begins with Vicar Aleph, which means honor the Aleph. Honor the unity. Even though Vicar Aleph, even though there is randomness, even though there is eruptions of chaos, even though this entire book is a book on how to keep everything right where it needs to be in your life, that's not the world that we live in.

It's not the world I live in. It's not the world that you live in. We don't live in the world of Vayikra and He called him to order and to perfection and to Yom Kippurness.

We live in the world of Purim. We live in the world of eruptions of God's absence and radical darkness. We live in the world of Vicar Aleph where the Aleph is hidden.

It is obscured. We can't find it. We look for it.

And where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? We are waiting for you, Aleph, right here in my pocket. Where have you gone? We live in a world where plans go awry and things that we thought would be don't come exactly as they should. I should have been married.

I should have been this. I should have been that. I wasn't supposed to lose my job then. That depression hit me like a ton of bricks. I had no idea that it ran in my family and there I was depressed beyond belief. I couldn't even get out of my bed.

Where has Vayikra gone? Replaced by a small diminished font of an Aleph introduced by an occurrence, a guess, a chance, a Heisenberg uncertainty principle. Will it be there? What will it be? I don't know how to locate it. Where have you gone? It says in the Torah that Purim is higher than Yom Kippur because on Yom Kippur everything happens just when it's supposed to.

The high priest shows up and you look at him and he's wearing his eight garments. You think, hmm, Zenya, the Marech Kohen. Something out of a book of Kohen Quarterly.

He's the Kohen who knows how to dress. Marech Kohen. And then all of a sudden he's so great.

On Yom Kippur everything is clear. I have this sin. I have that sin.

Let me put them apart. There's this one goat that's going to get sent out. The other one is going to go up and... Okay, cool.

Even the randomness of Yom Kippur where I have to choose the lots. It all works out just fine. Not so Yom, Purim.

On Purim, this thing is supposed to happen and it doesn't but then another thing happens. And the God positioning system, the GPS, the global, the way that it moves and... Vicar Aleph. When there is happenstance, when there is randomness, find the Aleph.

Find the purpose. Find the meaning. Find that thing that is unifying.

Find the thing behind the masks. In 1942, September of 1942, the great Viktor Frankl, a prominent Jewish psychoanalyst in Vienna, arrested and transported to a Nazi concentration camp along with his wife and his parents. Three years later, when the camp is liberated, his parents are gone and his pregnant wife is gone.

But he, that prisoner, number 119104, 119104, 119104, he had survived. And as he documented in a book that he wrote in nine days, Man's Search for Meaning, a book that has sold over 10 million copies and is perhaps one of the most fundamental and foundational books of Western civilization in the last 100 years. He wrote that the one distinguishing feature of those who survived the camp from those who didn't, in his opinion, an opinion that had been formed early in childhood and that had been proven to some extent in his experience in the camps, one thing was meaning.

Those who found meaning survived. Those who didn't, perished. He helped others find their aleph.

He helped them honor the aleph and search for it, even in a hell of circumstance, of vicar aleph, of it being hidden. He argued that it wasn't happiness or sexual strength. It wasn't those who had the most friends on their Facebook page.

It wasn't those who had the most money or those who had the most power, but those who knew how to find a hidden, obscure meaning and purpose, an aleph that had somehow gone and to pull it back. He says powerfully that there were two cases he remembered. One was a woman who had a child waiting for her in another country and another, a man who had written first volumes of a series of travel books and he had others to write and so he kept living for those.

They had a reason to live. They had an aleph. He used to say that the way to find meaning was not to ask what we want from life, but instead we should ask what life wants from us.

Not what we need from life, but what life needs from us. In my heart, in my mind, it's so clear to me now why Yom Kippur is not nearly as close as Purim. You see, Yom Kippur is about those certainties and Purim is about those uncertainties.

On Yom Kippur, we never turn to someone in synagogue and say, did I screw up? Can I help you? It's all you, God, all the time. W-G-O-D. 24-7.

That's not the holiest life. Purim is the only holiday where there is a mitzvah, there is a Jewish ritual moment, an opportunity where we turn to people and we give presents. What do you need from me, says Purim.

Not what do I need for forgiveness, what do I need to be holy, but what is needed from me. To me, that is the essence of the holiness of Purim. So tomorrow morning, right here in the

opening of the book of order, the book of controlling chaos, the book of temple rites and rituals, we will set the crooked path.

Right here in Vayikra, we will say Vayikra and Moses was called and we are called to go beyond chance and randomness and happenstance and to find a purpose and to live with it. That little aleph that could is something that we need to honor and search for. There have been a number of people here in the Romemu community over the number of years that we have been around who only after the fact have we discovered were people who had lost their purpose in life.

Only after the fact was I aware as a rabbi that there was vicar aleph happening here, there was randomness and despair in my own shul. And I sat and I asked myself every Friday night when 300, 400, 500 people come here, what is my responsibility as a rabbi to say to those who come in who are going to walk out as lonely as they were when they came in. They got a good hit of davening together.

And I promised myself, I promised myself that forever I will stand here and say to anyone in this community tonight and any night that feels themselves in vicar aleph, that feels themselves to be in their last rope, that feels themselves to be alone without a community, without friends, without a meaning, without a purpose, we're here. We want to know what we can do to serve you. Not what we need from you, but what you need from us.

How can we support? How can we help? The UJA Federation of New York is going to be putting out a program called Live With Purpose. It's a call for volunteerism across the Jewish world calling on everyone to put in hours in volunteer work because their assumption is that if you volunteer your time you transcend yourself. You transcend what you need and you ask the question of Purim which is, what is needed from me? To me that's the high holiday call.

So tonight on the Shabbat that precedes the holiest day of the year this coming Wednesday night, I want to ask you, may you remember how much higher Purim is than even Yom Kippur. May you buy tickets to come join us. Make a pledge to volunteer in this community or in your communities.

Ask yourselves the question, how is it, how can I live a life of meaning, honoring the Aleph, Vicar Aleph. May we be blessed as Purim to ask what is needed of us to change one mask for another and to firmly root ourselves in the deep abiding belief that behind all of the masks and appearances, there is a deep humanity that we all share. May we honor the purpose and the meaning we are called to live.

Please rise.