"He called to Moshe, and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: 'Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When a man among you brings an offering to God: from animals – from the cattle or from the flock shall you bring your offering'" (Vayikra 1:1-2).
1st Aliya (Kohen) – Vayikra 1:1-13
The Book of Vayikra starts by detailing the olah (elevation) offering. One who brought an offering had to lay their hands upon it (semicha). The shechita (slaughter) of the animal could be done by a non-Kohen, but the processes thereafter (catching the blood and sprinkling it on the altar) were performed only by the Kohanim. The olah offering was cut up and all of the pieces were burned on the mizbeach (altar). The verses detail an olah offering brought from cattle, sheep or goats.

Point to Consider: What is being hinted at by the Torah referring to one who brings an offering as "adam" (אדם)? (See Rashi to 1:2)

2nd Aliya (Levi) – 1:14-2:6
The Torah now details the laws of an olah offering brought from fowl. The process of killing the fowl differed from an animal offering; notably, the Kohen used his fingernail (melika) instead of a knife. It was also possible to bring an offering from fine flour (mincha), a handful of which was mixed with oil and thrown onto the altar’s fire by the Kohanim. The rest was baked and eaten by the Kohanim.

Question: What else was added to the fine flour mincha offering apart from oil? (2:1) Answer on bottom of page 6.

3rd Aliya (Shlishi) – 2:7-16
Several voluntary meal offerings are listed, some baked, some fried. These offerings had to be unleavened. Every offering – whether animal, fowl or flour – had salt added to it. The Torah states the laws of the parched Omer offering, which was brought on 16 Nisan (Rashi).

4th Aliya (Revi’i) – 3:1-17
A voluntary peace offering (shelamim) could be brought from cattle, sheep or goats. Only parts of it were burned on the mizbeach – other parts were eaten by the Kohanim and by the owner who brought the offering (see Rashi).

5th Aliya (Chamishi) – 4:1-26
Sin offerings (chatat’ot) were obligated for various accidental transgressions. A Kohen Gadol who accidentally contravened specific serious prohibitions had to bring a bull, parts of which were burned on the mizbeach; the rest were burned outside the camp. A similar process had to be done if the High Court’s (Sanhedrin) ruling caused an accidental transgression by the common people. If a king (referred to here as Nasi) accidentally transgressed certain mitzvot, he had to bring a male goat.

6th Aliya (Shishi) – 4:27-5:26
The variable offering (korban oleh veyored) catered for the means of the person who brought it – it could be an animal, birds or flour. This offering was brought by someone who intentionally refused to testify as a witness or who made a false oath. It was also brought by one who accidentally entered parts of the Beit Hamikdash (Temple) or touched sanctified objects when in a state of ritual impurity. An individual who unintentionally derived benefit from sanctified objects had to bring a male ram as a guilt offering (asham), as well as paying for the ‘damage’ and adding an additional fifth to the cost. An asham was also brought by someone who was not sure whether he or she had inadvertently committed the type of sin for which one would normally bring a chatat.

7th Aliya (Shevi’i) – Bemidbar 28:9-15
The reading for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh is taken from parashat Pinchas and details the Shabbat and festive offerings in the Temple.

Maftir (Shemot 12:1-20)
The special reading for Shabbat Hachodesh is taken from parashat Bo, declaring Nissan as the first of the months and introducing the Jewish calendar and the laws of Pesach.

Haftarah
The haftarah for Shabbat Hachodesh is from Yechezkel (Ezekiel), detailing the different weekly, monthly and festive offerings that the prince (Nasi) will be obligated to bring in the Third Temple.
After detailing the various burnt bird offerings brought in the Temple, the Torah states: “It is a burnt offering, a fire offering [with] a pleasing fragrance to God” (Vayikra 1:17).

Rashi (d. 1105) notes that the phrase used here - “a pleasing fragrance to God” - is also used in verse 9 regarding animal offerings. He cites the Talmud (Menachot 110a) which says that this similarity teaches that whether one offers more (a four-legged animal) or less (a bird), it is equally pleasing to God, provided that the person bringing the offering directs his/her heart to Heaven.

In what way is an offering more or less pleasing to God?

The Talmud (Berachot 6a) quotes a verse from the Biblical prophet Malachi: “And a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who feared God and for those who thought of His name” (3:16). The Talmud draws a lesson from this verse, that if a person thought about doing a mitzvah but, through no fault of their own, was unable to fulfil it, God considers it as if they had actually performed the mitzvah and they are written in the ‘book of remembrance’ for it. Given that in practice nothing was done, their reward is for the thought and intention.

It would make sense therefore, that such a person only receives the reward if their intentions were pure, for the right reasons. However if they intended to do the mitzvah for the wrong reasons, their thoughts and intentions would not be deserving of reward. This is implied from the final words of the verse which state that those written down will be those who “thought of His Name” i.e. they acted for the right reasons, for His Name’s sake.

Perhaps this is the meaning behind the statement from the Rabbis quoted by Rashi. Those who brought a cheaper bird offering may have liked to offer up an animal, but did not have the financial means. Since, through no fault of their own, they were unable to donate more, it is still pleasing to God and they receive reward for their thoughts and intentions, as if they had actually brought more. Yet at the same time, to make their offering pleasing to God, they must make sure to direct their heart to Heaven and thus gain the extra reward.

Often the barometer for success is results-based. Effort is commonly not recognised or rewarded for its own sake. The praise of the person who genuinely wants to do more raises important questions. Are we minimalist or maximalist? What is our thought process when approaching mitzvot? Are we trying to get away with the minimum or can we genuinely not offer more?

Not everyone has the opportunity and ability to “offer” more. If we do not, and we think about and feel this at the time, we are rewarded as if we actually had done more.
In 1966, Shmuel Yosef Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his “profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people”. Following the awards ceremony, he was asked if he would sit behind a desk and scribble something down on a piece of paper, so that he could be photographed in his writing ‘position’. Agnon agreed; the photo was duly taken and circulated around the world. After the assembled party had left, someone decided out of curiosity to look at what Agnon had actually written during that moment of fame. On the paper he saw five words taken from the High Holyday prayers: “Man is founded in dust and ends in dust”.

This week’s sidrah opens with the word “vayikra” (ויקרא), meaning “He [God] called [to Moshe]”. The letter aleph (א) is written in a smaller size than the rest of the word. According to the Midrash, the smaller letter represents the fact that Moshe did not want it to appear as if God had called directly to him, which might make him seem excessively significant. Instead, in his humility, he asked God to write the word without an aleph, so that it would almost read “vayikar” (ויקר), meaning “He happened [upon him]”. As a form of compromise, the letter aleph was retained, but in a reduced form.

God speaks to Moshe hundreds of times throughout the Torah. Why, therefore, is it specifically at the opening of the Book of Vayikra in particular that this dialogue is recorded as having taken place, and symbolically represented in this way? Perhaps this Midrash is intended to highlight the sensitivity required in order to properly understand the Torah. Without approaching it with the requisite sense of humility and awe, as Moshe did, it is impossible to even begin to understand its contents.

If so, then the placement of the small aleph at the beginning of Vayikra in particular makes perfect sense. Another name for the book of Vayikra is Torat Kohanim, meaning the ‘Laws of the Kohanim’. It contains many topics which are challenging and perplexing to understand. Many of the laws contained in this Book revolve around the Temple service, and would have been performed by only a select few. Therefore, there is a need to emphasise the humility required in order to correctly approach the study of these passages. Before questioning their rationale and understanding their intricacies, developing an appropriate sense of awe for the Divine Word is essential.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s choice of words that day was no coincidence. The greater the honour bestowed, the greater the importance of the honouree having the humility to remember his/her humble origins. In a similar vein, when faced with the most challenging passages in the Torah, having the humility to remember that it is the word of God Himself becomes ever more necessary.
Preventing for Pesach III: The Chametz Hunt  
by Rabbi Shmuli Sagal, Sutton & District United Synagogue

Pesach is a story of two halves. There is the pre-Pesach period, when we do our utmost to rid our houses of chametz. Then there is the festival itself, which is all about matzah. In truth, calling it ‘two halves’ is actually being generous to Pesach itself, as many people spend more time and energy getting rid of the chametz than they do eating matzah. Why is there so much fuss about chametz?

Removing chametz is not a regular mitzvah. In fact, the Sefer HaChinuch (Book of Mitzvah Education, 13th century) lists five separate commandments regarding chametz, including not even owning chametz on Pesach. Chametz also carries a very stringent punishment, more severe than most other forbidden foods. Furthermore, what makes chametz particularly unique, and perhaps a factor in its stringency, is that it is only forbidden for eight days a year. Generally, foods outlawed by the Torah are intrinsically problematic and are never allowed. Chametz holds the peculiar position of being objectionable for only one week a year.

A primary suggestion given for the prohibition of chametz is that it reminds us of the events of the Exodus, specifically the speed at which they occurred. Such was the swiftness of the flight to freedom, that the dough the Jews were preparing did not have time to rise (Shemot 12:39). We strive to have faith that God can liberate us from any predicament in a ‘blink of an eye’. On Pesach, we celebrate that miraculous and hasty salvation, by eating matzah and abstaining from even any hint of chametz.

There is a deeper symbolism in abstaining from chametz. The Talmud (Berachot 17a) refers to the yetzer harah, evil inclination, as being like “yeast in a leavened dough”. Yeast transforms simple flour and water into a puffed-up loaf of bread, instead of the flat cracker-like matzah it would otherwise become. So, too, the evil inclination fuels our ego and physical drives, making us more selfish and crass than we would ‘naturally’ be. On Pesach, when we celebrate God intervening to save the enslaved, lowly Israelites and take them as His own, there is no place for ego. For one week in the year, we keep away from chametz and our inflated sense of self, to make more space for God in our lives.

There is a custom to put out ten pieces of chametz on the night of Erev Pesach for bedikat chametz, the search for chametz. The reason for this is to satisfy the opinion that there is a positive commandment to actively get rid of chametz on the eve of Pesach. This is in contrast with the opinion that one should simply not have any chametz left by the time Pesach commences (see Talmud Pesachim 21a).

Applying our deeper understanding of chametz, we can explain this dispute as reflective of how one should approach the fight with our yetzer harah. According to the latter opinion, as long as we are not adversely affected, we can innocently continue on. However, according to the opinion that we actively place chametz pieces in order to seek them out, similarly we must be constantly self-searching. The pursuit of self-refinement never simply runs its course.
If you find yourself in Jerusalem on the popular Mamilla pedestrian shopping road, stand at its very end, furthest away from the Old City and look north west, you will see one end of Shlomtzion HaMalka street.

Unlike Queen Esther of the Purim story, Shlomtzion’s life was not filled with miracles, overt or hidden, yet we remember her until today thanks to this road, which thrives with life and activity in the centre of Jerusalem.

Under her stewardship, for a few short years during the Second Temple period, there was relief from the almost constant sectarian warfare that had defined this period. Yet as Shlomtzion was weakened by old age, her two sons, Hyrkanus II and Aristobulus II, stood to inherit the throne of Judea. Their enmity and power struggle with one another was a foreshadowing of the dark days ahead that preceded the destruction of the Temple.

Aristobulus was angry that his elder brother Hyrkanus had been named High Priest and was likely to inherit the crown after his mother’s death. He approached his mother with leading Sadducees, and delivered an ultimatum with three alternatives:

1. Shlomtzion should take the government away from the traditional sages (Pharisees) and put the Sadducees back in a position of power.

2. Aristobulus and the Sadducees would go to Aretas the Arabian and, with the help of an Arabian army, go to war against the Pharisees.

3. Shlomtzion should deliver all the fortresses of Judea into the hands of the Sadducees and appoint Aristobulus the General of the army.

Shlomtzion knew that Aristobulus’ threats were not empty, that in his bid for power he was prepared to ally with Judea’s enemies. At this point those enemies were the Arabians; a few years later he would court the Romans in his desire for unbridled control. These enemies would use the fraternal friction not only to enslave the nation, but to destroy the Temple and ultimately drive the people into the exile we still find ourselves in today.

Alone in her palace, Shlomtzion did not know how to move forward. Though none of the alternatives seemed good, she chose what she felt would be the least detrimental to the security of the people. She handed over 22 of the 25 fortresses of Judea to the Sadducees, retaining for the Pharisees the three fortresses with the most accumulated wealth.

She was also coerced into making Aristobulus the head of the Judean army. In this new position as head of the army, with the accumulated wealth and protected position of the 22 fortresses, Aristobulus declared himself king.

Shlomtzion advised those people still loyal to her to build up their own army and defend themselves from the coming onslaught of Aristobulus. However, the Nasi (Prince) and the Av Beit Din – Shemaya and Avtalion – foresaw civil war if they were to resist Aristobulus. At the same time, they recognised the imminent peril of the Roman threat knocking at their door, so they chose to not fight.

At the age of 73, Shlomtzion died. With her death, the last remaining period of spiritual and physical prosperity in Judea during the Second Temple period ended.

We would like to thank Rebbetzen Ilana Epstein for this extremely informative and engaging series. She will resume in the future with a new series, picking up from this point in Second Temple history.
Transform Your Pesach Seder

Look out for your Tribe Freedometer 3D pack of cards landing on doormats the week before Pesach!

These will also be available for download at www.tribeuk.com
Today is Rosh Chodesh! Not only is it Rosh Chodesh but it is also Parashat Hachodesh when the Jews received their first ever mitzvah - that's right, it was Rosh Chodesh!!

Rosh Chodesh marks the beginning of each Hebrew month. It's important as it helps us keep track of when the Chagim are. But before there were calendar apps, diaries and all the things that we use to know the date, announcing Rosh Chodesh was a much more significant event.

Two witnesses needed to have seen the new moon in order for Rosh Chodesh to be announced.

Anyone who saw the new moon would go to the Beth Din to testify.

The court would ask them detailed questions to confirm what they'd seen. When the court was satisfied that the new moon had been spotted, Rosh Chodesh would be announced.

When Rosh Chodesh was confirmed, a bonfire would be lit on the top of a mountain. The people in the next village along would see the bonfire in the distance, and then they would know it was Rosh Chodesh. They'd quickly light a bonfire on the top of their mountain to let the people in the next town know.

And so it continued. Bonfires on the tops of hills and mountains, lighting up the sky throughout Israel, publicising Rosh Chodesh and the new month.

Nowadays, we don’t need the bonfires but we still announce Rosh Chodesh in shul with a special prayer, which reminds us of that beautiful ceremony.

Did you know, Rosh Chodesh is a minor festival and some people make a point of celebrating it in some way? In our house we have ice cream on Rosh Chodesh!

Rosh Chodesh is an opportunity to think about renewal, we have a new month ahead of us and a new chance to fill it with mitzvot and all good stuff... CHODESH TOV!