

Shabbat Shalom.

Today we read the 41st Torah portion of our annual readings. Thirteen more to go until we begin again with Bereshit on October 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Our parsha is called Pinchas, which sounds enough like my married name, Pincus, to make me feel connected to it, especially this year, since today is both my father-in-law, Milton Pincus' yahrzeit, and my late husband Lew Pincus' birthday. This d'var literally had my name on it.

First, a brief overall summary, then comments directed toward the last triennial portion which speaks in great, repetitive detail of the sacrifices G-d commands of our people in ancient days. A previously boring and rather strange concept to me, our sages and rabbis have helped me to see the importance and relevancy of ancient sacrifice. It was these rituals that morphed into today's prayers which in some ways still resemble them. For example, our morning, afternoon and evening services parallel the times daily ancient Temple offerings. Our additional musaf prayer, recited on Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and festivals, pays homage to additional sacrifices that were formerly offered in the Temple.

Today's parsha began with last week's reading. A sorcerer hired by the king of Moab was told to curse the Israelites, but was only able to bless them. So a new diabolical but clever plan was conceived based on *sex and revenge*. (No wonder our history has become the topic of many Netflix series.) The Midianite women were sent in to entice the Israelite men into immoral and idolatrous behavior, knowing it would incur G-d's wrath. Men being men...the plan worked. One Israelite chieftain and a Midianite princess, were blatantly irreverent, in front of Moses and the elders, and at

the entrance to the holy Tent of Meeting! Their behavior so incensed Pinchas, who was a grandson of Aaron, that, in an act of righteous zealotry, he took matters into his own hands and dramatically ran his sword through the couple. *This brings us to today's parsha* in which G-d greatly *rewards* Pinchas for this act with His Covenant of Peace and a Pact of Priesthood, securing the priesthood for Pinchas and his descendants for all time. Pinchas's quick action averted G-d's anger and immediately stopped a plague, which had already killed 24,000 people. Our people nearly earned annihilation. *Pinchas, earned a parsha in his name.*

Next, G-d instructs Moses to take a census of men ages 20 to 60 in preparation for dividing the new land by lottery among the tribes of Israel. There are nearly 602,000 men. Related to land division, we read the story of the five daughters of Tza-la-fe-had, who petition G-d through Moses for a woman's right to inherit her father's land in the absence of male heirs. They are successful and the laws of land inheritance are permanently changed. What then happens in our reading is quite interesting and sets the stage for my comments today. G-d reminds Moses he will soon be "gathered to his people" and he may see but not *enter* the Promised Land. *Moses gets it*, but is concerned that the Israelites be given a worthy leader to guide them when he is gone. G-d tells him to empower Joshua as his successor. The remainder of the parsha, several pages long, is comprised of a detailed list of the offerings and sacrifices the Israelites will be required to make... daily, on Shabbat, at the New Moon, and on what we *call* the High Holy Days. Let's look at the sacrificial system, as it existed *then* and as it exists *today*.

Remember Moses' concern that G-d appoint a capable successor for his people? It's quite unusual in our Torah for Moses to suggest to G-d what

G-d should do. But Moses seems unable to leave this world in peace, without knowing that his people will be in good hands. It's *right after this request*, that G-d commands the specific sacrificial offerings. Author Chaya Shuchat suggests that Moses' request for a leader and the command for sacrifice are linked. She quotes the Lubavicher Rebbe who explained that Moses was worried not about our people's *physical* well-being, but about their *spiritual survival*. A leader was needed to provide the spiritual guidance to establish a homeland on a strong moral footing. And what was G-d's answer to this? It was the command to bring a *korban tamid*, a daily sacrifice, to the Temple. This holy endeavor would continuously convey to the Israelites that G-d is the King of the Universe, in a world that runs according to His providence. With such thoughts in mind, the Israelites would not be left, in Moses's words, "as sheep without a shepherd." They (we) would be part of a divine plan.

The term "sacrifice" comes from a Latin word meaning "to make something holy." The most common Hebrew equivalent is *korban*, which means "something brought near". Korbanot is the word for used for sacrifices. There were basically three types: The first was animals. These were called "sacrifices" when they were to be only *partially* consumed by the alter fire, with the remains for the priests to eat. They were called a "burnt offerings" when the animal was to be completely consumed. Chapter 29, verse 12 provides us with an good example of how this reads for the Yom Kippur sacrifice: *On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month (which is Yom Kippur) you shall present a burnt offering, an offering made by fire: 13 young bullocks two rams, 14 he-lambs of the first year, they shall be without blemish.*" Pretty specific! In addition to animals, other alter offerings included grains,

often mixed with oil, and monetary donations. The purpose of the sacrifices varied. There were offerings of thanksgiving, offerings for peace, offerings as a way to atone for sin, and more.

Rabbi Shimon Ben Azzai helps us to understand what these offerings meant to G-d. He writes: G-d clearly didn't need the items offered, but He did and does need to reveal His presence, His *G-d-liness*, in our world. Chassidic Jews believe that G-d created the world because *He wanted a relationship with us*. He needed us to turn to Him on a regular basis and say, "We know You're there. We know this is Your world, and we *want* You to be revealed in it." Attending to the sacrificial offerings helped the people do this. In Exodus 19:22, the kohanim are called "*those who come close to the Eternal*". In tending to the sacrifices, the priests' were closing the distance between G-d and human beings. Rabbi Ben Gazzi tells us G-d commanded Moses to build the sanctuary where the korbanot would be offered, so that He could "dwell among" our people. For the early Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, the purpose of sacrificial ritual was to appease their gods and heroes and to ask for favors or protection. But for the Jews, these rituals were the main process used to feel close to G-d, to honor Him, to win favor, offer teshuvah, to feel gratitude, to become better.

When the second temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, the sacrificial offerings stopped. They were prohibited because the only place allowed for sacrifices was the holy Temple. *Going forward*, Jews would fulfill the Biblical commandments and keep their connection with G-d, through *daily prayer*. The new way of connecting with G-d would be good deeds, tzedakah and prayer. Prayer has been called "the service of the heart", the way our ancestors would now experience holiness. Rabbis

taught we can become closer to God with the words of our mouths than through physical sacrifice. Talmud tells us one who *studies* the ancient sacrifices, is considered as if he has actually *offered* a sacrifice.

Moses Maimonides, In his famous book *Guide for the Perplexed*, argued that sacrifice was an early form of worship given to the Jewish people so they could learn how to serve God without feeling different from all the other nations surrounding them. But, he said, “a prayer service is really a better means than the sacrificial service of obtaining nearness to God” because “it can be offered everywhere and by every person.” And, of course, we experience this today.

In a piece entitled *Why Do We Pray?*, Rabbi Yanki Tauber shares some Chasidic thinking: He says “We pray because our soul is lonely. A spark of the Divine fire, *our soul* has journeyed to a world heavy and dark where its source, G-d, is rather obscured. The spark yearns for the Divine fire, and strives to be reconnected with it through prayer- those precious moments when the person the soul inhabits stops communing with the world, and communes instead with its Creator. When we pray, we are a standing paradox of body and soul. *Our body is praying for life and existence. Our soul is praying to escape life, and to transcend existence.*”

The format for our own prayerbook dates back two millennia. We praise G-d, then we ask Him for what we need, and finally we express gratitude for all He has done for us. Our prayers are meant give us comfort and hope, to help us feel less alone and more grateful for all we have. Though I sometimes think my prayers must bore G-d, I too follow a format. I begin by

thanking G-d for the good things that have happened that day, to me, to people I love, in our country, in the world. Then I ask G-d to bless my children and grandchildren with good health and help them to be their best selves. My misheberach list is next and it's now too long to remember without turning on the light and reading it. Then I ask G-d for help us fix all of the concerns that I'm pretty sure we can't fix by ourselves...like peace, in Ukraine and elsewhere, global warming, ugly political divisiveness, mass violence, COVID. I end with a few selfish things like "Please help my son get married soon and have a great life, please help me make this program a success, please guide me to make the right decision". I don't pray *every* night but I pray *many* nights, and I find it's a comforting way to conclude my day. In those minutes I feel like I have a partner who helps me feel more centered and more clear in my thoughts. G-d is cheaper than a therapist and He's a great listener. Not once has He ever interrupted me! However, *as lovely as prayer is*, for me it's even more rewarding to come to Beth Shalom and pray with you. Our collective prayer is about relationship with G-d and relationship with each other. We pray stronger when we praying together with one voice. It feels more spiritually elevating and more fun.

In closing, I now understand that neither the ancient acts of sacrifice nor the later years of prayer were ever for the purpose of changing G-d. I believe they were given for the purpose of changing us. In Judaism, *tefilah* (prayer), is a means to transform ourselves into more God-like and caring people, better able to repair our world. Viewed in this way, the biblical sacrifices no longer seem so strange. And my prayers don't seem so boring. In fact, I think it all seems kind of brilliant.

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