

## Offer from Yourselves – Parashat Vayikra 5781

Rabbi Michael Safra

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The late Rabbi Pinchas Peli, a prominent professor of Jewish Thought and Literature from Ben Guion University, tells a story from his childhood:

A wealthy man died and bequeathed his three sons three precious gifts. The first received a pair of binoculars through which he could see from one end of the earth to the other. The second received a magic carpet, which could instantly carry its passages to the end of the world. And the third received an enchanted apple that could fulfill any wish for the person who ate it.

One day, the son with the binoculars looked and saw that somewhere in a distant land, a beautiful princess was dreadfully sick and nobody could cure her. The king declared that any person who would restore the health of his daughter would be given her hand in marriage and eventually become king. Upon seeing this, the son summoned his brothers, and they all took off on the magic carpet. The princess ate the enchanted apple, made her wish to recover, and was instantly healed.

Now, each of the three sons came to the king and claimed that he deserved to marry the princess. Without the binoculars, we wouldn't have known; without the carpet, we couldn't have come; without the apple, she would not have been cured. And that's where the story ends. The king acknowledges that each made a convincing argument, but there is only one princess. Who should be the one to marry her, and why?

I can let you ponder the question for a moment; and if there was going to be kiddush (ahh, remember kiddush?) I would ask you to share your ideas there. But the point is that the end result of a healthy princess could not have been achieved without all their contributions; each son had a critical role to play.

There is a certain amount of disappointment when we reach Vayikra in our annual Torah reading cycle. The exciting historical narrative is now on pause as we contemplate the details of what Jewish tradition calls *Torat Cohanim*, the Priestly Manual; or in Greek, Leviticus. We don't offer sacrifices anymore; and not just because we can't, on account of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem; but because we've evolved. We don't find meaning in piles of bloody carcasses; we're just grossed out. We have better ways to serve God.

Hosea typified the view of the Israelite prophets when he said, "*ki hesed hafatzti v'lo zavah*, it is acts of kindness that I desire and not sacrificial offerings, obedience to God rather than burnt offerings." Maimonides taught in his *Guide to the Perplexed* that sacrifices were never the ideal method for approaching God. The ancient Israelites were spiritual descendants of pagans and idolaters. The Torah didn't invent animal sacrifice; it simply repurposed a practice they were already used to. "If you're going to offer sacrifices," God said in Maimonides' imagination, "it would be better that you direct them

towards Me than towards your idols.” But the ideal all along was to “graduate” from that kind of primitive worship.

But I want to ask. Certainly, we have moved beyond the sacrificial cult. But can we really say that our system of worship, our methods of drawing near to God are superior? Do we feel *closer* to the divine than our ancient ancestors did? Have we improved upon those ancient practices, or have we simply abandoned them?

The central attribute of the sacrificial system is presented in the opening verses of Leviticus: “Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: *adam ki yakriv mikem*, if a person chooses to offer **from among you** an offering to the Lord, he shall choose the offering from the herd or from the flock.” That word “*mikem*, from among you” – Rashi says it means that the offering must belong to you; you can’t take an animal from your neighbor or just bring a stray animal you found on the street. One of the key requirements is the laying of the hands: “*v’samakh yado*, he shall lay his hand upon the head of the offering.” The person is taking something that belongs to him and designating it, reassigning its purpose as a gift for God. The ancient Rabbis had a concept of *temurah*, substitution – I am bringing this animal as a substitute for myself. The key ingredient for a valid sacrifice is not the animal or the flour or the fire or the incense. **The key ingredient is you** – give of yourself, based on your means and your talents, offer yourself, to God; and, by extension, to the community and society that need you.

So now let’s look at our own, supposedly superior mode of worship. This is a beautiful sanctuary. The seats are cushioned and comfortable. Back when people came to services in large numbers, we used to note that our sanctuary can sleep over 640. But is this how it’s supposed to be? Is the characteristic of a beautiful synagogue that the seats are comfortable so that people can sit back and relax and enjoy the view?

It may be even worse on Zoom. Sure, it is nice not to have to get dressed up, convenient not to have to drive here, great to be able to grab a snack during the Torah reading if you want it. But can we give of *ourselves* through the camera? Can we participate? It’s one of the reasons we wear the uniform – the *tallit*, the *kippah*, the *tefillin* on weekdays: so we can feel a part of this, so we can give of ourselves. I don’t think I’m being unfair when I suggest we need to do more to turn the model around so that worship is not something the prayer leaders do while we watch, but **something we do ... together ...** each projecting our own voices.

Next week at this time, if the Holy Temple was still standing, we would be offering the Passover sacrifice, which was always brought on Passover eve, even if it was Shabbat. The requirement for that offering is what the Talmud calls “*minui*.” Every person who is to partake of the paschal lamb must be registered for a particular animal. Every Jew was to participate and no part of the animal could go to waste.

Today the equivalent of *minui* is probably the *seder* invitation. Invitations are going to be a little different this year; some of them are going to be virtual; and an invitation is not just a meal ticket. It is registry. The proper response to a *seder* invitation is never to ask: what time will we eat? The proper question is: what can I bring? How can I contribute to the discussion or the service or the meal? What

can I give of myself? My grandmother's *haroset* recipe? An insight about the *Haggadah*? Maybe I can bring the special binoculars or the magic carpet or the enchanted apples. *Adam ki yakriv mikem*, **Offer of yourself**.

Or *hesed*. Earlier, Noah cited the story of Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Yohanan walking near the Temple ruins in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yohanan told his colleague that we have a better way of connecting with God; we don't need sacrifices because we have acts of kindness. That sounds nice; and, indeed, recent surveys suggest that most Jews find more connection in service than they do in prayer. But is the way we typically do *hesed* sufficient?

*Bikkur holim*, visiting the sick has been all but impossible during the pandemic. But in normal times, do we do it? Are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable, or even uncomfortable, for the sake of a *mitzvah*, or do we delegate that task to clergy and other professionals? In the face of injustice, increasingly disturbing hate crimes against Asian Americans (and certainly against Jews) is it enough to watch the news and recoil in disgust? Or is there a way to do kindness "*mikem*", by giving of ourselves?

There is a tendency among many to back away. Some approaches feel too overtly political or divisive; not everyone agrees on the solution to every problem. That's a real concern; but it is not an excuse. We need a robust public discourse that invites diverse opinions and eschews groupthink. We like to quote Rabbi Tarfon: "It is not your duty to complete the task." You can't solve every problem. But remember how he concludes: "Neither are you free to desist, *v'lo atah ben horin l'hibatel mimenah*." *Adam ki yakriv mikem* – each person must offer from ourselves; **not just to think, but to do *hesed***; to make our actions an offering.

That is the message of this Priestly Manual we began reading today. The methods may change but the yearnings remain constant. The needs are great and the responsibility is clear: to give of ourselves, to participate, to register, to contribute in a way that brings us closer to God and brings *tikkun*/repair to our broken world. Shabbat shalom.

Ryan and Noah, it is such a privilege for me to be able to congratulate you on becoming bar mitzvah today. You prepared very diligently, as we could tell from your chanting of Torah and Haftarah, leading prayers, insightful speeches, and meaningful mitzvah projects to benefit the humane society and help people who lost so much in the hurricanes last fall.

You are both well-connected to the B'nai Israel. Ryan, your grandparents are longtime members here; your mother had her bat mitzvah on this bima; you began your Jewish education here in the Schilit Nursery School and have risen through the ranks. I remember when you were born because your mother's and my wife's pregnancies overlapped with each other; so there is this sense that we are all family participating in your joy.

And Noah, you were a little older when you came to B'nai Israel, but you jumped right in. You've been a very active participant in Talmud Torah. You are friendly and outgoing and have made a lot of connections here. Both of you have sisters who became bat mitzvah here. This is a little different than what they experienced, but we know the relationships will continue and that over time we will come to see the disruptions involved in your b'nai mitzvah experience in the proper context.

As you know, Parashat Vayikra describes a sacrificial system that is all but completely foreign to the modern Jewish experience. But there is one ritual requirement that we still perform, which is the laying of the hands. When a person brought an animal to the Temple, he was required to lay his hands on the animal's head to designate that animal as a sacred offering. Today, that ritual is done in a different context. The Hebrew term for Rabbinic ordination is *semicha*, literally laying the hands on a person who has completed the required course of study to be a rabbi.

And we do this in other contexts as well. In normal times, we would be standing together right now and I would be placing my hands on your head to offer a blessing. The idea is that in this bar mitzvah ceremony, we are designating you as responsible members of the community and declaring that you are ready – you've learned; you've matured; you understand and accept the duties incumbent upon you as Jews. I'm choosing my words carefully so you can understand that our blessing for you does not focus on the past or on your achievements in reaching this moment. We are focused on the future – all the things you will still do: the Shabbats you will celebrate, the texts and ideas you will still master, the mitzvah projects you will still support, the connections you will foster with Israel and with other Jews throughout the world.

That's what becoming bar mitzvah means. And it's a privilege for me, in front of family and friends and role models, to metaphorically place my hands on your heads, designate you as members of this sacred community, and declare that you are ready and willing.

So in that spirit, I invite all the participants this morning on both sides of the camera to please rise for words of blessing.