

This Week in Torah *Vayikra*

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3.19.21

The prophet Hosea wrote [6:6]: “For I desire goodness, not sacrifice; Obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings.”

As we begin the third book of the Torah, Leviticus, we are faced with a theological problem: how relevant is this “book of deeds” when most of the laws deal with a Temple sacrificial system? In truth, the chapters and verses of this book are mostly ritual and legal in function. Except for the story of the person gathering sticks on Shabbat and the tale of Aaron’s sons, there are no narrative stories given. We who are more rationally bent and have no desire for the return of the sacrificial systems have a problem—how to make this relevant for us?

The answer might come from the Torah scribe who writes the first word *Vayikra* with a smaller than usual *aleph* at the end of the word. The mystical tradition has a teaching that reminds the reader that a small letter indicates that the Divine light becomes concentrated at that moment and the intensity of Divine will is felt rather than proclaimed. That image helps us remember that lesson we encountered in Exodus as we grappled with the phrase *na’aseh v’nishmah*—we will do and we will hear. Rabbi Arthur Grant wrote that in doing a *mitzvah*, we hear God’s voice. Indeed, Rabbi Grant implies, every *mitzvah* is an invitation to know God a little bit deeper.

The skeptics among us would challenge this as it becomes the sacrificial cult: sure, but how many of the 613 *mitzvot* in Torah are related to sacrifices and we cannot (nor would we) do them? What then?

A simple answer is to study and learn them with an emotional intensity that it could be done. Maimonides wrote that the *mitzvah* system taught obedience and connection to God. Doing them helped create the stage for the Messiah’s return and reestablishment of the Jubilee regulations for freeing slaves and releasing debt—seeing the face of God in

another. The 12th-century poet Yehudah HaLevi adds that it will inspire people who live outside the land of Israel to move there and hasten the messianic age. Knowing this book for them was paramount to learning the centrality of God as the *Mitzvaveh*—the Commander behind the *mitzvot*. Remember the term sacrifice is an English word—the Hebrew is *korban*, meaning to draw us closer or nearer to God.

Let's now insert the prophetic caution about the sacrificial system. They warn that they could easily be done with an empty-hearted-intention. Look at the chastisement of Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea—they saw this as too common of a problem. People would do the act but not feel the connection. To frame it in the terms of the mystics, there was no small “*aleph*” challenging them to show some humility and dig deep into themselves to find a keen eye to embrace the small and silent *aleph* as a symbol of the Divine voice.

Here is where our modern intuitions need to kick in. Sacrifices are no longer the vehicle to connect to God. In our day-and-age, we focus on our actions and prayers. The prophet Hosea said in 14:3: “Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to God: Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; Instead of bulls we will pay (the offering of) our lips.” These words coupled with prophetic pleas compel us to take our doings with sincerity. That is the message of the small *aleph* at the end of the word *Vayikra*.

As we begin the third book of the Torah, let us acknowledge that challenge before us. God's words speak of rituals and practices that do not resonate in our contemporary settings. But hidden in the opening word of the text is a message—look deeply, understand the context even if not applicable. There you will discover a way to connect to God that will make the sincerity of your actions more intense. It will challenge you to acknowledge your place with humility and awe. Those traits will carry you and me far as we seek to create a Messianic age – a beautiful way of describing a world filled with wholeness and holiness.