

This Week in Torah *Vayikra*

Put some heart into it, guys! That should be the motto of the Book of Leviticus. After all— the sacred space has been built, the Presence of God is tangible from within—a fulfillment of a command to “Build Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them,” and now the next task to be taken on is the drawing of the people closer to God through sacrifices—in Hebrew *korbanot*, coming from the Hebrew root *k-r-v* meaning “near/close to.” But merely going through an act does not build *kavanah*, the spiritual integrity, which gives life to the *mitzvot*. The Rabbis of the Talmud understood this dilemma just as we grapple with it today—we do what we are supposed to do, but do we FEEL that it has any significance?

Picture this scene in the Temple parking lot in Schenectady. The couple pulls out from their spot after services and starts to drive home. The conversation begins with a review of the service, similar to a conversation they had after leaving a show at Proctors not too long before this night. Their usual seats were fine but the damn air conditioning kept blowing on them. The cantor had a lovely voice, but they wished to hear familiar melodies like their favorite “Oseh Shalom.” The rabbi droned on and on; his message was ok but it should’ve been shorter in duration. The critiques and criticism flowed easily—afraid that their bitterness will detract from their desire to be better people, they resolve to come back again... and again. They did what they were supposed to do as good and faithful Jews, how come they didn’t FEEL a sense of spiritual engagement?

The founders of Reform Judaism in the 19th century firmly believed that the soul’s spiritual awareness could be stirred only through a rich intellectual and rational comprehension of what was being done. That cerebral encounter made rituals more vibrant and *mitzvot* more compelling. For generations, that *weisenschaft deJudentum* [an intellectual, rational study of Judaism] left little room for a spiritual awareness that came from a different place. It leaves many of us in a unique quandary--we who struggle with faith seek to find meaning that is not only relevant, but spiritually uplifting in an emotional realm.

Centuries before this age of *Haskalah* [Jewish intellectual enlightenment], the 11th century French Rabbinic sage known as RaSHI gave some insight as he commented on this week’s *parasha*. Citing a *Midrash* from Leviticus Rabbah, he found that the key to such a combination of heart and mind can be found through a vulnerability that a worshipper brings to the sacred experience. In Leviticus 1:2, it said: “Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: When any person [in Hebrew *ADAM*] presents an offering of cattle to God, you shall choose your offering from the herd or from the flock.” RaSHI noted that the word for person was the name of the first man—Adam. He

commented that Adam brought his sacrifice from anywhere because he was told that the world belonged to him as a chief caretaker. Over the course of time—people [*b'nei Adam*] developed a sense of property and ownership. As a result, the Israelites had to choose from their OWN herd or flock—picking from within the context of their property. For me, RaSHI focused in on giving from what is own as an act of giving from the self as an act of humility before God. The choosing centered the individual to understand the price and the meaning of what was being given. A true gift and a real sacrifice were the results. Such a sacrifice as described in the Leviticus 1:2 was an expense.

The word I would use to describe the experience would be “vulnerability.” And that is something we would be encouraged to bring as we sit in the pews. We are not at Proctors, we are not at the theater –watching and observing. We are in the House of God with its aura of sanctity. We are not there to be entertained; we are there to ascend as if our words were the *korbanot* of the day.

Let me encourage you to bring some vulnerability into the synagogue. Bring expectations of a higher self and transformation. Dig deep within what you seek to be and how you can be inspired to be closer to God. Let the words and melodies move you to ascend to lofty heights. Permit yourself to be moved and not hindered in that regard. We are the successors to a sacred tradition—not patrons observing the show!