

Vayikra, 5781  
Rabbi Zev Wiener

There's no getting around the fact that the sacrificial catalogue presented in Parashat Vayikra is challenging for many contemporary Jews to relate to. While our Sages have emphasized the intrinsic value of familiarizing ourselves with the rituals themselves, these rituals are also laden with deep symbolism regarding our own present-day service of G-d. One salient example of this truth comes from the Torah's presentation of the distinct offerings of individuals possessing disparate financial means. Citing the Talmud, Rashi (1:17) observes that the same descriptor, “רייח ניחוח לה” -- *a pleasing aroma to G-d* -- is used in reference to the voluntary Olah offering of the expensive livestock generally brought by the wealthy, as well as of the relatively cheaper fowl Olah offering brought by the poor. The repetition establishes axiological equivalence, teaching:

אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוון ליבו לשמים

*One who gives much is the same as one who gives little, as long as his heart is directed towards Heaven.*

Even more blatantly, Rashi in the following verse (2:1) cites the Talmudic teaching pertaining to the Mincha meal-offering, brought by individuals of even lower socioeconomic means:

לא נאמר נפש בכל קורבנות נדבה אלא במנחה, מי דרכו להתנדב מנחה? עני. אמר הקב"ה מעלה אני עליו כאלו הקריב נפשו

*The term “soul” is not used with reference to (the offerer of) any voluntary offerings except for the meal-offering. Whose practice is it to dedicate a meal offering? A poor person. Hashem said, (the offering is so beloved that) I consider it as if he offered his soul.*

Our Sages go out of their way to emphasize that there is no superiority related to the absolute value of the sacrifice, and that G-d is no more pleased with the rich individual's livestock than with the pauper's meager bird or even flour. Rather, G-d desires that each person serve Him specifically in accordance with whatever means he or she has been granted. On a spiritual level, the "poor" and the "rich" sacrifices are not limited to the realm of financial affluence alone. Rather, these terms represent all of the

apparent disparities that may exist in facilitating or obstructing one's service of G-d. The value of a person and his or her Divine service has little to do with absolute metrics of success or societal rankings. In the eyes of G-d, everyone is seen in the context of his or her own innate tendencies, challenges, and life circumstances. Don't get distracted by what others are doing, the Torah teaches; rather, just bring the sacrifice that is right for you.

Experience teaches that one of the greatest sources of misery in life is comparison. Humans may naturally compare almost everything in their lives. And while cautious comparison may sometimes catalyze growth, if left unchecked, it may come with great consequences. A person may be doing just fine in life, but in seeing that his or her accomplishments do not seem to measure up to those of others, may fall into immediate despondency. This is a terrible error, on multiple grounds. Firstly, no matter how convinced we may be to the contrary, we never truly know how another person is actually faring. Life is complicated. When we compare ourselves to others, we look at a facade, an isolated slice of a person's complex and multifaceted life that we know almost nothing of. People's lives are far more intricate than meets the eye, and it is a terrible mistake to forfeit our own equanimity for the sake of a false illusion.

More significantly, however, as the poor and rich sacrifices remind us, comparing our accomplishments to others' constitutes a fundamental fallacy in our perspective towards our own life's work. Jewish spiritual values frequently differ from Western perspectives. While Western culture, even dating back to famed Olympic medalists and wreathed gladiators, celebrates the end result and productivity -- did you visibly excel or did you not -- the Jewish perspective looks deeper. Our purpose during our short stay in this world is not to attain fame, renown, or followers; our purpose is to achieve greatness in the eyes of G-d, a status that comes solely from struggling with and trying to overcome the unique deck of challenges we have been dealt. True greatness can only be measured by the opposition that it faces, and the hardest challenges are rarely visible to the naked eye. Some people are born with inspiring role models, while others are born to fend for themselves. Some people are born into opulence, while others are greeted by penury. Some are naturally endowed with a more anxious or depressive disposition, while others are naturally more even-keeled. No two people share the same sets of insecurities and fears. The result is a necessarily relative scale for self-evaluation, and an intrinsic inability to compare our entirely unique selves to others; we can only compete against ourselves.

To judge the success of a life based on how much money one has earned, what career one has pursued, or whether one has children and how those children have turned out relative to their peers, is to succumb to false absolute metrics and comparisons, which give little credence to the unique struggles that one has overcome. G-d looks deeper than all of this. ובלבד שיכוון ליבו לשמים .

In the Sheva Berachot recited during the week following a wedding, we bless the newlyweds that G-d should bestow joy upon them as He did upon Adam and Chava when they married in the Garden of Eden. I once heard it suggested that Adam and Chava serve as the ultimate paradigm of a joyous marriage because they were the only two people alive in the world at the time. There was no one to compare the quality of their marriage to. No one else to regret having not married. No one to give them preconceived notions of what their marriage "should" be like. They simply lived in tranquil bliss with their own personal experience, without regard for how it might measure up to the situation of others. Even in our times, one who is able to block out futile comparisons may be said to truly reside in the Garden of Eden.

In light of this observation, it is perhaps not coincidental that the Torah uses the term "אדם" in introducing the sacrificial obligation (1:2). Our Sages teach that this somewhat less common terminology, as opposed to the more common "איש," alludes to Adam, the original man. Whenever we serve G-d, we must adopt the mindset of Adam (as opposed to his son, Kayin), living as though we are alone in the world. Our service of G-d must be performed in the Edenic state in which harmful comparisons are blocked out. G-d is not interested in whether our life's offerings are more or less impressive than others'. Rather, He cares solely that we live our lives and attempt to serve Him to the best of our personal abilities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Kli Yakar Vayikra 1:2