

# **Drawing Closer**

## **Parsha Vayikra, March 28, 2009**

### **I. Introduction**

Today we started reading the third book of the Torah, called Vayikra. This is also the name of the first parsha in this book. The name derives from the first Hebrew word in the parsha “And He called” – referring to Adonai calling out to Moses from the tent of Meeting (Mishkan).

Vayikra is commonly known by its Greek name, Leviticus, so called because it contains the code of the Levites. But, far from comprising solely the Levitical code, as the name Leviticus would imply, the book of Vayikra is also a spiritual guide addressed to the community at large that attempts to show how to live one’s life in harmony with one’s highest values. Vayikra attempts to create a society based on moral law spelled out in mitzvot. In Vayikra, for instance, we encounter the core teaching, “You shall love your fellow human being as yourself”.

Other teachings from the Book of Vayikra, such as those in today’s parsha concerning Temple sacrifice seem less relevant today, and are not immediately applicable for a complex of reasons centered around the lack of a Temple and the lack of the many conditions required for Temple sacrifice.

I need to make a confession at this point. Whenever the topic of “Temple sacrifices” comes up, my reaction is to wonder why we continue to try to make sense at all of these outmoded practices that probably none of us here today would wish to revive. Instead of trying to glean lessons by reinterpreting them in a symbolic or metaphorical framework that is more palatable to our modern sensibilities, wouldn’t it be far simpler to invoke the Reconstructionist prerogative that “the past has a vote, not a veto” and ignore those writings in Vayikra that set out the rules for Temple sacrifice? Perhaps we should treat them as a vestige of a past that is irrelevant to us now, and that no longer serves a useful function, like our appendix?

So, why continue to study the myriad rules, restrictions and contingencies of Temple sacrifice that are mindboggling in extent, arcane, and seemingly irrelevant today?

The simplest answer is that Temple sacrifices are part of our heritage, and need to be understood in the context of the primitive stage of human development in the ancient world. In that epoch, sacrificial gifts were a primary way to express awe, thanks, and respect for the animal that was about to be consumed, to atone for killing it, and – as some have speculated – to arouse and then to remove anxiety about the extinction of life.

Giving such “gifts” probably harks back to the animal sacrifices from a much earlier period in human history when primitive man symbolically “gave back” to its “supernatural owner” a token of the animal that was about to be eaten and, in the words of the philosopher of religion and anthropologist Robertson Smith, “allowed a stream of

life to flow” placing the receiver of the offering (the gods) in the power of the giver” and tended to build a binding relationship.

At first glance, animal sacrifice may seem like a primitive, brutal practice. But, it can also be seen as representative of a world view in which animals were considered precious, eaten rarely (pun intended), and with reverence. In this world, repentance for a personal failure (that could impede the “stream of life”) could be expressed by the substitution of a food belonging to the sinning individual and offered in his or her place.

And, speaking of “substitution”, for all types of sacrifices (olah, or gift offerings; peace, or thanks offerings; or sin, or guilt offerings), other food, such as the peaceful turtledove or fine grain, (which required substantial sweat of the brow to produce) could be substituted for a domesticated animal, if the giver could not afford to give one as an offering. The important point is that the offering had to be something owned and valued by the giver: it could not be something hunted or foraged in the wild.

The great 12<sup>th</sup> century Torah scholar, Maimonides, wrote that sacrifice was included as part of the cultic ceremony in the Temple because, in Biblical times, mankind was not yet ready to be weaned away from this familiar practice of the surrounding pagan tribes for communing with their gods. According to Maimonides, sacrifice was inferior to prayer or philosophical meditation.

However, there are deeper lessons that we can learn from reflecting on Temple sacrifice, but we have to search for them! The most important point on which to focus is that neither the English words “*sacrifice*”, commonly used in the sense of “to give up something of value”, nor “*offering*” quite capture the Hebrew word “*korbon*” used in the Torah for the Temple practice. *Korbon* literally means “to draw close”. Thus, when an individual presented an offering at the Temple, it was meant as a concretization of the desire to *draw closer* to God, *The Absolute*, “that which is sacred”, or to whatever else works for you to express this; one comes close to God by giving back, or giving up, some of the life which we have been gifted to nourish and sustain us<sup>1</sup>. In passing, it should also be noted that the Biblical prophets Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Malachi contend that sacrifice is only a part of serving God and needs to be accompanied by acts of loving kindness (*chesed*) and justice (*tzedakah*).

## II. How Can Karbonot Have Meaning For Us Today?

While preparing this d’var Torah, I stumbled upon the PBS Special “The Bible’s Buried Secrets”. One segment showed vivid footage of the existing Samaritan community in Israel performing animal sacrifice as part of their Passover celebration on Mount Gerazim, ritually re-enacting the Exodus commandment to slaughter a lamb and to spread

---

<sup>1</sup> Peace, or thanks, offerings -- in particular -- also allowed the community to *draw closer* together and to strengthen its power by the sharing of a communal meal of the sacred offering. The peace offering (probably the only times that the flesh of animals was eaten) was divided among the participants, promoting unity and binding the members more closely to each other.

its blood upon the doorposts of the Israelites. Clearly, the participants are deeply moved – even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century! What accounts for this emotional intensity? How does this *korbon* ritual *connect* the Samaritans to God? What is happening that makes it so powerful?

The challenges that Vayikra poses for me are: “what does ‘*Connecting to the Absolute*’ or ‘*Drawing Closer*’ mean for us moderns”, and “would a structured, ritualized event, to replace the *korbon* of Biblical times, which engaged all the senses and drew the participants’ attention to the power of life and death, have meaning for us today”? Does the synagogue prayer service serve this purpose?

Vayikra suggests that spiritual practice should not be left to our whim, but requires prescribed rituals. Perhaps we can conjecture together. Let’s break into small groups and discuss.

### **III. A Final Thought**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Talmud scholar Malbim commented that one who is *fully* human is one who has free will and makes choices with freedom and intelligence. In Vayikra 1:2. the word *adam* is used to describe this “being who is most essentially human” instead of *ish* (man, denoting “merely a type of human creature”) or *nefesh* (soul). Notice the first word in the Hebrew on the third line of *Etz Hayim* on page 587: “Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: A person, *adam*, among you who would bring an offering to Adonai ...”

To be an *adam* is to have choices and to be able to exercise them.

So, paraphrasing, what Vayikra 1:2 is saying is: an *adam* who, from the vantage point of knowledge, *freely elects* to bring a *korbon*, seeking to connect to his or her highest values, is one who expresses his or her *full* humanness, and is an *adam fulfilled*.

May we all in the 21<sup>st</sup> century succeed in finding ways to “bring a *korbon*.”

Shabbat Shalom