PARSHAT TSAV DVAR TORAH

It used to be so simple.

Before synagogues, before commentaries, before fixed prayer, all the Israelites had to do was sacrifice a cow or a few ears of corn and they were in the clear. Need rain? There's an offering for that. Commit a sin? Sacrifice a cow. "Accidentally" sin? The Torah's got it covered.

And the Torah certainly does have it covered. Every single offering is described in exhausting detail and specification. The animal or food, the process, the aftermath, everything explained, down to the literal last drop of blood—which, as Parshat Tsav highlights, is to be dashed against the altar.

Tsav focuses specifically on the aftermath of the korbanot: how long they should be left on the altar, what should be eaten and not eaten, the consequences of not following the laws concerning what can and cannot be eaten. Through this set of laws, the Torah creates a standardized, legalistic means of communication with God. This applies to any set of laws in the Torah concerning Korbanot: specific to the last detail, they create one, and only one, way to repent, one way to thank, and one way to ask.

In contemporary society, the incredible attention painstakingly paid to every aspect of a *korban* can feel irrelevant. These specific religious structures created to standardize the process of communication with God no longer apply to a Jews in the Diaspora. We have no *Beit Hamikdash,* no *mizbeach.* Instead, we have separate, scattered communities, some still isolated from the rest. Exiled from Israel a thousand years ago, we were forced to find new ways of reaching God: *tefillah. teshuva,* however the individual and his or her community chose.

The detachment from traditional structures fits aptly with Martin Buber's distinction between "religion" and "religiosity." In *I and Thou,* Buber defines the former as "preservation", the second as "renewal." Religion, he argues, provides a structure to shape the creative aspect of religiosity--however, it also has the capability to hold back the interpretive, active religiosity that is so vital to faith.

The consequence of pursuing religiosity over religion is estrangement. Modern faith is self-oriented. Rather than using religion as a framework to build religiosity, many tend to do the opposite, trying to build structure through the inherently subjective religiosity. Consequently, tradition, history, and community can be neglected. The modern ideal of "what I believe" becomes more important than the eternal "what we believe."

However, too much structure is also problematic. When focus is placed on the process, rather than the intention, it's difficult to find meaning in the prayer. In Tsav, and the other parshiot outlining the sacrifices, the instructions are so long and specific that it can be difficult to derive meaning from them.

In Berakhot 4, "Rabban Gamliel says: Every day a person must pray eighteen (the Shemonah Esreh/Amidah)" while R. Eliezer says: One who makes his prayer 'set' [by reciting the same words every time] his prayer does not constitute "pleading" [for divine mercy]." This famlous mishna sets out the fundamental dichotomy of prayer: keva and kavanah, structure and intention.

In his book *Holistic Prayer,* Rabbi Avi Weiss explains: "*Tefilla* is not about superficially reciting words, it's about internalizing them so that one can communicate powerfully with God." He goes on to cite Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who highlights the difference between

pe'ula, the action of prayer, and *kiyyum,* the fulfillment of prayer. *Pe'ula* is the physical recitation of the liturgy, using proper pronunciation and performance, while *kiyyum* "remains in the realm of the heart." To reach Rabbi Weiss's "holistic prayer", it is essential to remain in the realm of physical and emotional prayer at the same time.

This is obviously easier said than done, and the problem is that trying to balance the two, especially when personal opinion and means of prayer can (and should) be different for everyone. When everyone has their own version of connecting with God and their own codes of what constitutes as prayer, teshuva, or praise, it becomes difficult to unite a community in faith. In the first book of Shmuel, we see Chana being accused of being drunk for praying differently. When each person has his or her own way of prayer and cannot understand the other's, the community becomes fragmented.

The struggle is how do we maintain a community where every voice in prayer is valued, and yet also maintain a sense of unity. Too much kavana means we have no structure with which to pray together; too much keva means religiosity is stifled. Tsav, and the entire system of sacrifice, highlights the importance of keva, but leaves little room for kavana. Even traditional prayer and fixed liturgy have the potential to do the same. The Jewish community needs to both preserve and renew at the same time: keep the old structures, but leave room for growth and personal interpretation within them. Use them as a framework, rather than a constraint, to leave room for true, holistic prayer.

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom!