

Parshat Vayika 5779

The Middle Age of the Torah

If the annual cycle of Torah reading is a spiritual life-story of the Jewish people then, with Vayikra, we have hit middle age.

Gone are the dramas of the starting-out relationship between G-d and Israel: the discovery of one another, the agony of enslavement and the ecstasy of the revelation. Here, in the middle book of the Humash, G-d and Israel settle down to a stable, seemingly timeless, interaction, through the medium of korbanot.

Like life's middle years, Sefer Vayikra is Torah spirituality at the height of its powers. Vayikra provides the prototype for how the Jew interacts with the Creator. It is the power house in terms of vocabulary and concepts, for the prayers and supplications which after the destruction of the Temple, have replaced the korbanot. It is here in Vayikra that we encounter het and asham (sin and guilt), vidui (confession) and kaparah (repentance). The tone of Vayikra is focused and undiluted - no need for introductions, stories or explanations. To adopt its own imagery, in Vayikra it feels we have stepped from the outside the camp into the Torah's inner sanctuary.

But as is well known, life's middle years carry subtle dangers. In middle age, one can become so engrossed in the busy and productive present that one starts to forget the struggles of the past and the certainty of a future end. Complacency can set in. There may be a loss of direction. Our rabbis, I think, sensed this lurking danger in the spiritual busy-ness of Vayikra. And so, in amongst the busy details of the sacrificial ritual - of altars and priests, of slaughtering and blood sprinkling - they found brilliant insights to ward off any spiritual mid life crisis.

One small example of this spiritual sensitivity is in chapter 4, where the Torah is dealing with unintentional wrongdoing, starting with the top of the spiritual tree, the "cohen hamashiah". When it comes to the nasi (prince), at verse 22, our Rabbis seize on the commonplace conjunctive at the beginning of the verse, "asher" ("that"), and relate it to "ashrei" ("happy") - happy, in

Rashi's words, is the generation whose prince takes care to bring an atonement sacrifice (hatat), even for an inadvertent act of his; how much the more certain it is that he will do penance for his wilful sins.

Another insight is around the "variable" sacrifice - korban oleh veyored - described at the beginning of chapter 5. Here, the type of animal brought as a korban takes account of the wrongdoer's financial circumstances. A sheep or goat is the prescribed sacrifice for wrongdoing (hatat); or if the person can't afford one of these, then turtledoves or young doves are taken; and if he can't afford those, then plain flour. But in Rashi's comment on 5, 13, we see the Rabbis' sharp awareness of fairness, and how people's financial position can change very suddenly: learning out from the subtle switch of language from "me-hatato" to "al hatato" in the verses, our Rabbis teach that if one set aside the "bigger" korban at the time of the wrongdoing, but later became poorer, he is liable only for the smaller one; but if he got wealthier, then he is liable for the larger one.

But it is in the very first word - and name - of the parasha - "Vayikra" - that our Rabbis find the most powerful antidote to the danger of degrading Torah spirituality. They do this, again, through observing a most subtle difference of language. Rashi points out that when G-d approaches Bilaam in sefer Bamidbar, the Torah uses the closely related word "vayikar" (Bamidbar 23,4) - only one letter different from "vayikra". But the spiritual difference, as the story in Balak shows, is that Bilaam relates to G-d as a force of nature, subject to chance and needing to be propitiated. Bilaam too builds altars and offers sacrifices - but it is in the hope that the divine might, by chance, be appeased. As Rashi says, this is a base and fleeting kind of spirituality.

The word "vayikra", by contrast, is "lashon hiba" - the language of love. Preceding and underlying the complex ritual relationship between G-d and Israel in our parasha is this spiritual love. Therein lies the fundamental difference between "our" rituals and "their" rituals. "Hiba" - love of G-d - is what ties our middle age in Sefer Vayikra to our roots and greater destiny.