

When Bigger is not Better

This week we begin reading from the Book of Leviticus, which is the third and central book of the Torah. Now, when we start to read this book which is dominated by detailed laws and minutia of the ancient sacrificial rituals, it may seem a bit of an exaggeration to claim that it is the “central” book of the Torah. Of course, one could say that since it is the third book out of five, yes, it is central in that respect. But the importance of Leviticus goes far beyond its placement in the canon. In fact, Leviticus not only contains nearly one half of the 613 mitzvot in the Torah, its description of holiness serves as the fundamental principle of Judaism and of all the Abrahamic religions (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself” Leviticus 19:18).

Still, one must concede that reading line after line about this sacrifice and that ritual and those laws of purification can cause the modern eye to glaze. With that in mind, sharpen your eye’s focus just a bit to consider the opening lines of this week’s Torah portion, *Vayikra* (Leviticus 1:1-5:26).

וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר: בְּדַבַּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֶרְבָּן לַיהוָה מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה מִן־הַבָּקָר וּמִן־הַצֹּאן תִּקְרִיבוּ אֶת־קֶרְבָּנְכֶם: ג אִם־עֹלָה קֶרְבָּנוּ מִן־הַבָּקָר זָכָר תָּמִים יִקְרִיבֶנּוּ אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד יִקְרִיב אֹתוֹ לְרֹצְנוֹ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

Adonai called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: ² Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: When any of you presents an offering of cattle to Adonai, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock. ³ If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, it should be a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance in his behalf before Adonai.

Note that the first Hebrew word of the Book of Leviticus, *vayikra*, is written with an *alef* that is unusually small. The classic interpretation is that the small *alef* hints to the nature of sacrifices. Namely, that when we sacrifice something, we give something of ourselves away and thereby reduce our physical presence. Furthermore, *alef* is the first letter of the word *ani*, which means “I.” Again, the small *alef* implies a smaller self. And yet, the selfless act of a personal sacrifice and generosity for the greater good makes us and the world around us greater, not lesser.

This past week found us shrinking and shrinking in our physical foot print. We have been quarantined: staying at home, working from home, attending classes from home and only venturing out for emergency supplies. Many have sacrificed well beyond their personal freedom of movement. Some have lost jobs. Some have lost businesses. Some have had to postpone weddings and *B'nei Mitzvah* services and celebrations. Even funerals have been reduced to a gathering of immediate family at the gravesite with no *shiva* services or condolence visits.

The sacrifices are tremendous, but we do them because we know what is at stake. We sacrifice for the sake of our health and for the sake of everyone else's health. We are making ourselves smaller in order to help the survival of our family, our community, our nation and our world. This week's Torah portion reminds us that the holiest expressions are found not in making ourselves grander. Rather, it is when we give of ourselves, when we make sacrifices, when we are generous with gestures of kindness, compassion and emotional strength that the world can be healed.

As most of you know, Temple Sinai has many online classes and services to help us connect with one another during the COVID-19 crisis. Please check the

full schedule of offerings on our Temple Sinai website and/or the Sinai Snippets. There are often updates, so please consult the daily email messages.

God-willing, we'll soon be through this terrible pandemic and be able to gather together once again. In the meantime, please know that we are here for you. Call us. Write us. Text us. No concern, no issue is...too small.

Shabbat Shalom,

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