

NOT JUST SACRIFICE

by Rabbi Label Lam

It's admittedly hard to relate sometimes to the concept of "sacrifices", in general. And then there's all the various types of offerings and all their specifications with regard to being voluntary or obligatory, completely or partially consumed, animal or meal, method of disposal, to be eaten by who and where, and the multitude of motivations for bringing the sacrifice.

Sure it gets a little confusing and it seems a bit anachronistic but I remember a seemingly simple comment made by one of my great teachers that might prove to be a key to this otherwise closed box that is placed prominently as the center piece of our Torah

We were walking outside together after a class on the subject of "sacrifices" and the Rebbe told me, "To understand it properly one must appreciate the setting. The Beis HaMikdash (The Temple) was like a hospital." That's all that he said and the rest he left up to the fertile imagination of the listener to expand the concept and fill in the details of the paradigm.

A hospital is a place of high human drama. There are scenes from both ends of the spectrum of life. Life and death lie in the balance. Joyful and prayerful hearts fill the adjacent waiting rooms where special individuals in their distinctive garb, known as doctors, do their focused work, quickly teasing out tears amidst torn flesh and fresh blood.

It's a place where people confront the reality of mortality and the fragility of life. Everyone is humbled in that place by a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness surrendering ultimate hope to a higher power beyond the reach of even the best of surgeons.

The Beis HaMikdash was also an elegant restaurant with the smell of fresh baked goods and tasty roasted meats wafting through the air. In certain designated places people sat as groups and ate those tasty foods reveling in the special ambiance and aura of holiness that pervaded even one of the most materialistic activities eating.

Simultaneously the Beis Hamikdash was an opera house. The symphonic sounds of the Levites playing their glorious tributes to The Almighty singing with full hearts barely drowned out if not accompanied the bleating of the sheep, mooing of the cows, and the mournful moaning of hearts broken and dislocated longing for their source. On that stage, in costumes unrivaled, and with drama real as life itself the Jewish soul learned to laugh and cry to sing and sigh its way back a state of wholeness.

Now we are left with only a few glorious shreds of the original experience, like the text of a siddur, with its prayers of thanksgiving and repentance. Can we compare even a sincere and thoughtful reading of the song sheet insert that comes with the musical CD to the full flavor of hearing the CD or witnessing the play performed live? It's the difference between being there and not!

If we read the menu of the restaurant can we taste the food and can it fill our bellies? Can reading a medical textbook or a manual on hospice care put us in touch with the urgency of life or the emergency of death if we only stand passively outside and watch? The Beis HaMikdash was a slice of intense reality. It was the place where a person could find oneself tangibly in the context of all contexts.

Perhaps, though, the best and happiest model to understand the experience of The Beis HaMikdash is The Jewish Home on the Holy Shabbos. There, a menu of delight comes to life in rich concentrations of good foods, smells, song and the drama of shared emotions. There, the history world meets its destiny just as heaven touches earth. Community, family, parents, and children are bound in a envelope of goodness.

The word for "sacrifice" - "karbon" is from the root of the word for "closeness". Therefore the essence of what went on in The Beis HaMikdash can best be described as the activity of "drawing closer" - closer to ultimate and immediate reality, not just sacrifice.

Good Shabbos!

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