

LESSONS FROM THE SACRIFICES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Speak to the Children of Israel, and you should say to them, 'A person, when he will bring from you an offering to G-d, from the domesticated animals, from the cattle and the flock you shall bring your offerings.'" (Leviticus 1:2)

We now begin the study of Vayikra, which was given the name "Leviticus" in the Greek translation. It's an appropriate name, because much of its content concerns the Tabernacle, the Temple and Priestly Ritual.

This being the case, some think that "Vayikra" isn't especially relevant today. In fact, I am told that the Reader's Digest edition of the Bible, faced with the question of what to "condense," simply excised this entire book!

That's simply not a Jewish view of the Torah. From the call ("Vayikra") to "... Har Sinai" (Vayikra 27:34), the living word of G-d never ceases to be relevant. When we look carefully at the Torah, the lessons leap from the words. The very first word of this week's portion, Vayikra, was written by Moshe with a small Aleph (the final letter) -- this is a lesson in Moshe's humility, one that many writers discuss (I did in 5762, for those who want to read an explanation -- it's found on our web site at <http://torah.org/learning/lifeline/5762/vayikra.html>).

If we are going to discuss the korbanos, the sacrifices, we need to dispel misconceptions having to do with primitive practices and some idea of a god that is "hungry" or "thirsty for blood." None of these, fortunately, resemble what you find in the Torah.

In the Hebrew original, the Torah uses the word "korban" -- this is what we translate into "sacrifice" or "offering." Rabbi Shmshon Rephael Hirsch regrets the absence of a better German translation -- a complaint equally applicable to English. A korban, he writes, neither involves giving up something of value as implied by "sacrifice," nor is it a gift as implied by "offering."

The root of the word korban is "karov," a Hebrew word meaning to approach, to come close. A person is "MaKriv" (bringing close) a korban. He doesn't "sacrifice" it or "offer" it, he brings it close - and this is not just a matter of semantics. "The MaKriv," says Rabbi Hirsch, "desires that something of himself should come into closer relationship with G-d."

[Many mistakenly believe that a korban or offering was simply for expiation of sin. In the Torah itself, however, most korbanos are not associated with transgressions, and the exceptions are mostly

inadvertent acts. For the vast majority of deliberate violations, the Torah does not describe any offering to be used as part of an atonement process.]

In actuality, there are many different types of offerings, involving every sort of property a person might have -- not only animals, but flour, wine, water and salt were all placed on the altar. But in addition one sanctified his or her first fruits, could donate property whether moveable or land, and gave money as well. All of this is in addition to the foods destined for the Cohanim (priests), Levi'im, the poor, and for the needs of the festivals in Jerusalem.

Never in Torah is there any notion of G-d "eating" a korban. They are called a "re'ach nikhoach," which could be translated "pleasing smell," but "re'ach" can mean a spiritual uplift as well. There is certainly no physical benefit or need fulfilled. The idea of a korban is that it is pleasing to G-d when we express a desire to make ourselves godly at the expense of our physicality. This can be expressed in our deeds, in our charity, and, yes, in the korbanos.

The first offering discussed is the "elevation offering," which was consumed in its entirety on the Altar. It could come in the form of a cow, sheep, goat, or even bird -- depending upon the individual. The Torah teaches us that while a wealthy person might bring an expensive offering of a cow, the poor man could come with a single dove and demonstrate the same desire for attachment to the Divine. In fact, one could bring an offering of mere flour as well!

Next discussed is the Shelamim, or peace offering, followed by the Chatas for inadvertent sins. There are actually four different varieties of Chatas, depending upon whether the transgression was made by the High Priest, the King, the nation as a whole (based upon an erroneous ruling from the High Court, the Sanhedrin), or by an individual.

Most of the world's religions declare their founder or leader to be Divinity embodied, or, at least, free from sin or error. The Torah not only expects even High Priests and Kings to sin, but allows for errors from the High Court that impact upon the entire nation. There's no infallibility doctrine, nothing miraculous about our leaders. We follow the Sanhedrin because G-d told us to do so, not because we attribute divinity to the Rabbis within.

Look how many lessons we've found in just the first portion of Vayikra, and we've barely scratched the surface! The Talmud says about Torah, "Delve into it, and delve into it some more, for everything is in it."

Good Shabbos,

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