

THE IMPORTANCE OF AHAVAS HASHEM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And He called to Moshe . (Vayikra 1:1)

We left off at the end of last week's parshah with the Divine Presence descending to dwell upon the Mishkan. The Jewish people had done all they could to make the Mishkan "work," executing every last command of God and construction detail with enhanced human accuracy. After a careful inspection of all the work by Moshe Rabbeinu all of it was approved and blessed.

All that remained, at that point, was to breathe the "soul" into the Mishkan, something only God could do by allowing His Presence to descend and give the Mishkan the spark of "life" for which it was built to be a home. Like a newborn baby that, after gasping its first breath of air, cries to confirm it has been successfully born, the Mishkan breathed its first breath and transformed into a spiritual living threshold between the world of God and the world of man.

One could, and many do, look at the Mishkan as merely a physical structure in which we brought sacrifices to God, just as in other religions. Even if they believe in God, Torah, and that the Mishkan was really commanded by Him, they don't see anything magical about it. There was a mitzvah to build it, there were mitzvos concerning it, and making God happy is merely a function of technically fulfilling both.

They would be right—for them. For, just as giving birth to a baby is merely an initial step along its path to fulfillment, going as far as the Divine Presence dwelling on the Mishkan was only an initial stage of its development. It turns out that, just like with respect to a person the soul God puts into him is not the end of the story, just the beginning of it, likewise does the Mishkan also require the same additional element that God "cannot" provide to allow it to flourish—our love.

In other words, just as the birth of a child provides the parent with a new opportunity to feel and express his or her love, likewise did the Mishkan provide the Jewish people with an enhanced opportunity to feel and express their love for God. The service that occurred within it on behalf of the Jewish nation, as technical as it was, was really the Jewish people reaching out to God from their depths of their heart.

Or at least that is what it was supposed to have been. To think that it was only the Divine Presence that infused the Mishkan with life was a mistake, just as it is to assume that a baby can grow into a fulfilled adult left alone and without any emotional support. The Talmud, discussing the impending destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnetzar's approaching army, sums it up like this:

He hewed down [the Jews] as he proceeded until he reached the Sanctuary. Upon setting fire to it, it wanted to ascend but it was pushed down from Heaven . . . He was elated [with his triumph] when a voice came forth from Heaven saying to him, "You have killed a dead people, you have burned a Temple already burned; you have ground already ground flour." (Sanhedrin 96b)

For a building that was already burned it still looked quite good. Physically, yes, but just as an atheist can look like the paradigm of good health on the outside, though spiritually he is dying, likewise the Temple building looked strong to the eye, but it had already been destroyed spiritually. A Temple, or Mishkan for that matter, without love of God is like a human without a soul, and neither can last very long like that.

Sefer Vayikra, therefore, is not merely about which sacrifices to bring, and how. It is not only about being holy, especially as a kohen, and avoiding illicit relationships. It is not only about the holidays and Shmittah. It is about how to go about developing a greater appreciation of our relationship to God and a deeper love for Him, and how to infuse the Mishkan with that love.

Not just the Mishkan, and later the Temple, but every aspect of our service of God, beginning with our prayer. As we know our prayer is the stand-in for the sacrifices that we cannot bring again until the Temple returns. And though sacrifices could be something as simple as a meal offering, they were usually some kind of animal, something as small as a turtledove or as big as an ox.

Without question, the bringing up of an animal to the Temple and then watching it get slaughtered on our behalf was a far more involving experience than walking into a shul to be part of a minyan. People are sensitive to what their birds are feeling or what their dogs and cats undergo at the vet so it was certainly emotionally involving to be in the Temple and watch animals be killed, dismembered, and then burned on the altar.

As it should be. As the verse says:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. (Tehillim 51:17)

On a simple level this means that a person can only serve God with humility. The essence of our serving God is a sense of gratitude which decreases as our sense of entitlement increases. The more we feel we have coming to us the more we resent what we don't have, which does not put us in the proper frame of mind to serve God. It certainly makes it hard for us to infuse our prayer with love.

Even human relationships work this way. The more a person loves himself the less he is able to love others. You have to like being who you are and have a sense of self-respect, otherwise you can't love others either. But the moment a person feels too strongly about himself the less he can feel for others, and that destroys relationships.

Rashi's first explanation on the entire Book of Vayikra, on the very first word of the book, is about the relationship between God and man, and specifically with the Jewish people. Throughout the Torah,

when God speaks to Moshe Rabbeinu, it uses the Hebrew "vaydabehr," or "vayomer," both of which mean "and He said." Why all of a sudden did the Torah switch to the word "vayikra," which means "and He called"?

Rashi answers by explaining that "vayikra" is a language of endearment, which is why the angels use it with respect to God. At the very beginning of the parshah we learn that the book is about loving God, about how to infuse our service of God with a deep love. It is that which breathes life into our service of God.

To look at the way many of us pray, one might think that rigor mortis has already set in. The love just isn't there. People feel an obligation to pray, so they come to minyan. But, once there, it is often business as usual: get the Tefillin on, get through the service, and then be out in the "real world" as soon as possible.

Service it is. Service of the heart it is not.

Then we wonder where God is, why we can't feel His Presence in our daily lives. We can't understand why miracles do not happen for us, and why things occur to us and the Torah world in general that seem to be so counter to what we think God wants for us. We believe in Him, that He is there and watching everything, but are baffled as to why He remains so silent at times when we wish He would speak up.

If, however, we examined our approach to our service of God, whether it is our learning of Torah, our tefillah, or even making Shabbos, we'd probably see that all of it lacks ahavas Hashem—love of God. We are obedient in action, some more than others, and tow the party line, but we fail to fully go the next level, and that is infusing life in all that we do by breathing the breath of love and gratitude into our service of God.

Which spouse supports the other when the love has been drained from the marriage? How many friends remain friendly when the love seems to have left the relationship? Even employers, if they want true loyalty, have to become beloved by their staff. You cannot compare the quality of the output of employees who love their bosses to that of workers who are indifferent to their employers, or worse, despise them.

When it comes to human relationships, you have to earn the love of another person. That usually amounts to doing virtuous things, like being selfless and caring more about others than for yourself. We like virtue in other people because it reveals their souls to us, the true source of chayn.

However, as the Rambam points out, God has already done more than enough to earn our love. If we don't love Him, as he points out, it is because we have yet to focus on His incredible virtue:

What is the path to loving Him and fearing Him? When a person contemplates His works and His awesome and mighty creations, and sees in them incomparable and endless wisdom, IMMEDIATELY he will love, praise, glorify, and greatly desire to know his Great Name, as Dovid

wrote, "My soul thirsts for God, the Living Almighty" (Tehillim 42:3). (Yad, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 2:1)

It's worth it, for a number of reasons. Love of God is one of the Six Constant Mitzvos, so we have to do it anyhow. But even more than that, it is the life force of our service of God, especially our prayer. Like with respect to any act of love it is almost as pleasurable, if not more so, to give it than it is to receive it. Prayer goes beyond the simple fulfillment of a technical obligation. It becomes an otherworldly experience that has the power to elevate us in everything else we do. It breathes life into our lives as well.

Text

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