

# THE VAYIKRA CHALLENGE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Sefer Vayikra (Book of Leviticus) has been given a bad rap. As a topic, Vayikra is often seen as detailed, dry, and mostly irrelevant. First of all, the Korbanos (offerings) and other temple services require a Bais Hamikdash (Temple). Secondly, most of the laws are the responsibility of the Kohanim. Thirdly, as a study, procedural ceremonies are tedious. Occasionally we are treated to a story or two, but most of Vayikra appears limited to the Temple functions and the priestly services.

The truth is that Vayikra describes life as it should be and could be. When the Bais Hamikdash or Mishkan stood, they were places where the individual came to recalibrate his outlook on life. They were places of intensity and serenity. The atmosphere was charged with focus and purpose. G-d was real and self-sacrifice was an expression of humility, not martyrdom.

Wouldn't it be great to just stop for a moment and take a breather? Time and events move around us so quickly that we forget why we do all the things we do. From playing to school to work to sleep, we go through the motions of life and living and never ask ourselves, "why"? This week's Parsha and all of Sefer Vayikra are intended to answer the question of "why"?

Why are we doing all the things that we do? From waking up in the morning to going to sleep at night, we struggle to make ends meet. Why?

Family, friends community and work battle for dominion over our time, energy, and emotions. We walk the tightrope of responsibility, attempting to juggle them all, while hoping to keep the balance between "them and me." Why?

The childhood years were the easiest. Our natural egocentricity created around us a protective shell that kept the rest of the world at bay. "Feed me, bathe me, dress me, love me, and I'm a happy camper." So long as our basic needs were being met, life couldn't have been better.

With the advent of school, schedules, homework, grades, friendships and social engagements, life got complicated. All of a sudden, it became important to prioritize, make choices, and find the balance between what we want and what we can afford. In other words, accepting that we can't do everything and that everything costs. There are no free lunches.

Along with prioritization and recognition of cost we learned responsibility. There really aren't any free lunches. We get what we work for. We discover what we are worth by learning what we can do. All of a sudden, life has value; life has purpose. Dimensions of social responsibility, personal

development, and spiritual awareness add value, purpose and direction far beyond the intrinsic value of the specific effort, service or product. Sefer Vayikra challenges us to recognize and accept service to G-d as the truest purpose of our efforts.

Witnessing "the Kohanim in their service and the Leviyim in their song" forced each person to evaluate his own life by the scale of sanctity and purpose. "Am I serving G-d to the extent that I can? Do I live my life with a smile on my lips and a song in my heart? Am I satisfied with the little of my lot just as the Kohain is satisfied with his one bite of Showbread? Do I revel in the gift of giving just as the priests rejoice in their gift of service?"

While standing in the Temple courtyard, a person could witness the panorama of human struggle and opportunity. The sick, the needy, the pure, the innocent, the sinner, the repentant, the healthy and the content all entered through the Temple portals. All were in search of meaning and perspective. All were in search of guidance and forgiveness. All were in search of closeness to G-d.

"It is this nearness of G-d which the Jew regards as the highest, indeed the only attainable, good... Without G-d's nearness, he feels "beast-like", stripped of all those qualities which elevates him to the destiny of a human being and whose values he regards as the sole standard against which to measure his own outlook on life and his own concept of human happiness - concepts that become clear to him when he enters the halls of G-d's sanctuary." (Rav Hirsch 1:2)

Vayikra is a challenge. It confronts each of us, in whatever capacity and position, with a choice. Will we continue to eke out a mundane existence living by the sweat of our brow and the strength of our hands; or, will we embrace life as an opportunity to sanctify the mundane in the service of G-d and humanity?

Accepting the Vayikra challenge meant willingness to confront oneself and one's society. Society, friends, and family profoundly influence us all. We each need the time and space to step back and evaluate who and what we are. The Bais Hamikdash provided the individual with that time and space.

All three components, person, time, and space were evaluated upon the Temple Mount. All three components were subject to rigorous controls and directions. Certain locations were holier than others. Certain times were more opportune than others. Certain individuals had greater rights and responsibilities than others. However, within the structured hierarchy and function stood the lone individual confronting himself and G-d. Whether man or woman, husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter, brother or sister, young or old, the Bais Hamikdash demanded personal and individual introspection.

However, the personal introspection was done as a part of the nation. It was the nation who maintained the Temple. It was the combined half-shekels of the nation that purchased the public offerings. It was among the multitudes who came to petition, beg, praise, and thank G-d that the lone person confronted himself.

Take for example, the Korban Chatas, the Sin Offering. The Pasuk states, "He shall acknowledge to himself (V'Hisvadu) that regarding which he has sinned." (5:5) Rav Hirsch explains, "The sinner is not expected to make a confession to another man, and certainly not to G-d, Who, in any event, does not need our confession in order to know that we have sinned. It is to himself that the sinner must admit that he has sinned. Indeed, such an admission of guilt to oneself is the very first, indispensable step toward mending one's ways..."

At no time was he truly alone. At no time was he able to attain closeness by himself. Each of us needed the other in the same manner that the Torah was given to the nation, not the individual. Torah requires a teacher, a student, and a partner; so too, closeness to G-d requires individual determination, a Bais Hamikdash, a Kohain, and a national support system.

This was true for all the offerings. The routines, regulations, and demands focused the individual on subjugation and service, humility and purpose. The owner would stand by as the Kohain administered his offering. The Kohain became his proxy, the Kohain became his intermediary. The Kohain became his spokesperson. The Kohain modeled for all the function we were intended to fulfill. Just as he bridged the gap between ourselves and G-d, so too were we supposed to serve humanity in bridging the gap between themselves and G-d.

The goal of the Vayikra challenge is to refocus our personalities and efforts on serving G-d and humanity. Every seemingly irrelevant detail and tedious nuance challenges us to reconsider the tendency toward the selfish and the mundane. It behooves us to embrace the study of Vayikra with intense enthusiasm and expectation.

"An unfettered personality that subordinates its thoughts, its aspirations and its achievements to G-d of his own free will: such is the personality to which G-d's command was addressed and which is a prerequisite for the offerings made to Him." (Rav Hirsch 6:2)

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