

THE WORLD OF VAYIKRA

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Experience and contrast are the basis for wisdom and understanding. It is our own experiences that allow us to understand the experiences of others. Once we understand what others have experienced we can empathize with them and offer advice. For the most part, that is what we call wisdom.

It is also the meaning of the Golden Rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself." First you must love yourself before you can love someone else. First you must understand and appreciate the circumstances and experiences of your own life before you can understand and appreciate the circumstances and experiences of someone else's life.

Imagine trying to appreciate the breath-taking beauty of the Grand Canyon or the majestic grandeur of the Rockies without the benefit of having actually seen them. No matter how descriptive the actual or verbal picture might be, it cannot compare to the experience of seeing them with your own eyes.

The Talmud in Shabbos presents the Golden Rule somewhat differently than commonly quoted. Hillel the Elder did not say, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The actual quote was, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your friend." The Talmud's approach is pragmatic rather than theoretical. First and foremost, love means never do to someone what you do not want done to yourself. We each know the pain of having been insulted. We have each experienced the indignity of being "the butt" to someone else's joke. We can each remember what it means to be lonely or ignored. We have all been scarred by not having been properly thanked or appreciated. It did not feel good and it does not feel good. Therefore, we should not do the same to anyone else. Do not insult anyone else. Do not make fun of anyone else. Do not ignore or show indifference to anyone else. Always say thank you and express appreciation for what others do for you. That is the Golden Rule. It starts with you and extends outward to embrace others. That is the practical meaning of love.

This week's Parsha begins the compendium of sacrificial laws with the statement, "An individual who brings near and offering" (1:2) Rashi references the Medresh that explains the seemingly unnecessary usage of the word "Adam - an individual." Grammatically speaking, the Torah could have simply written, "When you bring near an offering" Why does the Torah insert the word "Adam - an individual?"

The Medresh explains that it refers to Adam, the first human. "Just as Adam did not bring his sacrifice

from anything stolen because the entire world belonged to him, so too you should not bring your Korbanos - sacrifices from anything stolen."

An offering on the Mizbeach - alter should reflect the subjugation of its owner to G-d. Respecting the personal rights and properties of others is foremost among all social behaviors in demonstrating personal subjugation to G-d. It acknowledges that all that we are and all that we have is ultimately from G-d. Therefore, what I have is mine because G-d wanted it to be so, and what you have is yours because G-d wanted it to be so. To steal is to deny G-d's primacy and intent in this world.

Why was it necessary for G-d to associate Adam, the first human with this concept? Logic alone dictates that offering a stolen sacrifice to G-d is antithetical to the concept of Korbanos.

Sefer Bereishis established separation as natural to G-d's design of the universe. Therefore, it is natural that G-d separated the Jews from the rest of the world. Sefer Shemos explained that G-d separated the Jew from the rest of the world to give them the Torah and appoint them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. As priests, the Jews are responsible to minister to the rest of the nations and teach them, by example, about G-d. It is Sefer Vayikra that details how the Jews are supposed to behave so that their lives reflect sanctity and divine intent. Therefore, on a very basic level, it makes perfect sense that G-d would start Vayikra with an emphasis on the most fundamental expression of G-d's involvement in society - the prohibition against stealing when bringing a Korban.

On a deeper level, Rav Dessler offers an insight into the Torah's reference of Adam-the first human. Adam, because he was the first human, was unique in all of history. Except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, everything else in the world was available for his use. He could not steal even if he had wanted to. There was nothing to steal because it was all his. Therefore, Adam did not have the inclination for taking what wasn't his. In the depths and recesses of his heart he did not harbor any feelings of coveting or jealousy. Covet what? Be jealous of whom?

The experience of bringing a Korban to the Mizbeach was to inspire us to banish from our hearts and minds any inclination of coveting or jealousy. The total subjugation of our being at the time of the offering was to reflect, "with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our possessions."

Rav Dessler concludes that the physical world may defy our attempts at banishing all thoughts and feelings of coveting and jealousy because it is a physical world that is shared by us all. However, the spiritual world is unique to each of us. In the world of spirituality, sanctity, and individual purpose no one can take what is ours from us and we cannot take from others what is theirs. In the spiritual realm we are like Adam, the first human.

Let us extend Rav Dessler's insight a little further. It is incumbent upon each of us to see beyond the physical presentation of our humanness and recognize G-d's intent. G-d does not care for the physical and the material. G-d's goal is the sanctification of the physical in pursuit of spirituality. To the extent that we appreciate the uniqueness of our own spiritual potential and accomplishments will be the extent that we respect and appreciate the sanctity of others. To the extent that we

respect and appreciate all others is the extent that we acknowledge G-d's primacy in this world.

Are you important? Are you more important than anyone else? Are you more important or less important than your spouse or children? Does G-d consider you to be more important or less important than anyone else?

It makes sense to say that the degree to which you consider anyone else important will be in direct proportion to the degree that you consider yourself important. How else could you understand or appreciate the meaning of importance? It must start with you before it can be extended to anyone else.

The difference between belief in creationism and belief in evolution is purpose. Was the universe created with intent and purpose or was it a cosmic mistake? If you believe in G-d the Creator then you believe that the universe is part of a divine plan. If you do not believe in G-d the Creator then the universe has no purpose beyond that which you want or do.

G-d is often portrayed in our prayers as an artist who intentionally fashioned the universe. The description certainly suggests intent and purpose, so let us examine it a little more closely.

When painting a portrait the artist must plan two fundamental dimensions; the actual figure to be painted and the background that will frame the figure. Once the painting is completed, ask the artist which dimension is more important, the figure or the background? The artist must answer that both are equally important; one without the other would compromise the original intent of the portrait and its final production.

Which is more important in a car, the engine or the wheels? We understand that both are equally important if the vehicle is to accomplish its purpose of conveying us from place to place. One without the other renders the car useless.

Who is more significant in the universe, you or me? Who is more important to G-d, you or me? If G-d is the artist Who created the universe with intent and purpose then I am as essential to the final production as anything and everything else in the universe. In contrast to myself I must extend my own sense of significance to everyone else. They too were intentionally and purposefully created by G-d and included in the universe. They too must be as significant as I am and as important as the rest of creation.

The Golden Rule should be applied to all our relationships: family, friends, business, communal, country, and the environment. G-d created each of them; therefore, they are as important to G-d as we are. Imagine a world of respect, encouragement, and appreciation. Imagine a world without waste, abuse, pain, indifference, and loneliness. Imagine a world that begins with us and embraces the entire universe. That is the world of Vayikra.

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