

AN ALTERNATIVE FOR ANIMAL SACRIFICES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The parsha of Vayikra concerns itself with the topic of kodshim - animal sacrifices which constituted the core service of the kohanim/priests and the people of Israel in the Mishkan/Tabernacle and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. Much ink has flowed and much human genius has been expended to attempt to explain and rationalize the nature of this type of service and why, somehow, it should be found as being pleasing in the eyes of the Lord.

Regarding the sacrifices of animals on the altar by Abel and Noach in the book of Bereshith, we see that their offerings were received with Divine favor. But the entire issue, as to how killing an animal somehow might expiate a human sin and bring forgiveness to that, is mysterious, especially from the perspective of current Western values. It would be foolish to deal with this issue as far greater people than me have been reticent to go there. Suffice it to say that we must treat this area of kodshim as being on a plane and level of beyond human understanding and appreciation.

But just as in the physical world there are so many things that work and we cannot explain why they should work, so too in this spiritual realm of kodshim we have to accept that animal sacrifices somehow do accomplish their Torah purpose - even though we are unable to understand why this should be true. Judaism is a faith of rational thought and moral values. But, it is also a faith of mystery and other-world spirituality. It is this combination of wisdom and truth that make Judaism so unique.

The Torah presupposes human error and sin to be a constant. Even the most righteous person is not truly free of sin. Yet, Judaism does not foster any idea of "original sin." It believes that we are born with noble souls and enter this world unsullied. Nevertheless, it also recognizes human nature - and that it can become cruel, violent, lustful and sinful even from an early age.

The Torah, of necessity, must provide a mechanism to cleanse one's soul once more if the person has sinned. This mechanism is kodshim/animal sacrifices. With the absence of the Temple that mechanism has morphed into prayer, good deeds, and true repentance for wrongs committed. The goal is the same - to reintroduce into our lives a sense of holiness and higher purpose. It teaches us that we can right wrongs and repair broken hopes and hearts.

The details of kodshim as written in the Torah and, as expounded and expanded in the Mishna and Talmud, are like the mysterious formulae and equations used by physicists and chemistry

professors that are unintelligible to the ordinary man on the street but nevertheless work and accomplish their stated functions and goals. We have to find our way without the Temple being present, without these formulae and equations to help us to cleanse ourselves. The Torah has provided us with an alternate route to arrive at that goal. We should constantly exploit these opportunities - prayer, good deeds, honest repentance, and improvement. Then our lips will truly replace the kodshim that we no longer have.

Shabat shalom, Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com