

Parashat Vayikra 5781

Shabbat Shalom. We begin the third book of the Torah this Shabbat – *Vayikra* in Hebrew and Leviticus in English. For most modern people it is the hardest book of the Torah to relate to because it mostly occupies itself with the duties of the Levites, the tribe of the twelve tribes that was dedicated to the religious and/or spiritual life of the people. The Levites had no land but were essentially supported by the other tribes for whom they did all the rituals at the ancient Temple. The Levites were the tribe to which Moses and his siblings (Aaron and Miriam) belonged. The priesthood was the domain of a particular extended family in the tribe of Levi – the descendants of Aaron who was the first High Priest.

Have human beings changed so much in the thousands of years since the exodus from Egypt? One of the things that always strikes me is how human and recognizable the emotions described in the Torah are. All the emotions that most people experience are depicted dramatically – love, anger, jealousy, fear, compassion, awe – the desirable emotions and the less desirable ones. The actions that motivate various activities are all recognizable. We may not respond to those emotions and needs in the manner our ancient ancestors did. Most people cannot relate to the concept of animal sacrifices. However, they can relate to the idea of sacrifice itself – the idea of giving up something in order to attain something else more desirable.

Essentially the sacrifices in Biblical times were a form of giving up something precious with the hope that G!d would look favorably upon the person bringing the sacrifice. There were individual sacrifices, that is, sacrifices brought for an individual and by an individual, and there were sacrifices offered on behalf of the entire people.

What are we willing to sacrifice? One of the more common uses of the word in contemporary times is to refer to things we are willing to give up in order to attain something else. We might be willing to give up certain foods because we consider it healthier to not eat them or because we want to lose weight. If we go to school to learn something or to acquire a degree, we're usually willing to give up our time in order to study because there's a larger goal in view. We're willing to delay gratification in order to attain this longer-term goal. I remember hearing or reading about an experiment that was done with little kids in which they were offered a cookie that they could eat immediately or not eat that cookie and get two cookies maybe half an hour later. The experiment followed these kids over the next thirty or forty years. The ones

who waited the extra half hour (or however long it was) and got two cookies later, generally achieved harder to reach goals later in life than the kids who opted for the one cookie immediately.

The concept of sacrificing something for a greater goal or a greater good is actually pretty common in society. Parents are often willing to give up things for their children – it might be to give up their time in order to work more and provide greater economic security for their children or to be able to provide a better education and future opportunities for their children. That’s very often the scenario seen among immigrants who hope that their children will achieve “the American dream.”

What are we willing to sacrifice as a society? That’s a big question. Certainly, in times of war, as in World War II, the country as a whole was willing to give up a lot for the war effort. Are we too divided as a society today to make those kinds of sacrifices? Are people willing to give up the privileges they took for granted, to create a more equitable society? Are we willing to give up a certain lifestyle and level of luxury in order to combat the real threat of climate change? Right now, the majority of the population might be willing to make changes in their lives in order to ensure a future for later generations, but many people prefer to view the science regarding climate change as a hoax. Do they feel that way because they don’t want to believe it, or because they don’t want to be inconvenienced, or because they simply don’t care about future generations? Has our society become much too narcissistic to be willing to adjust its lifestyle for the sake of future generations? I don’t have answers to these questions. What I do ask myself is, how can we risk not making the necessary changes to combat climate change? It is very difficult for me to comprehend someone who does not take what 99% of climate scientists say seriously. Probably all of us were brought up in an educational system that valued science and facts.

There were many different types of sacrifices mentioned in the Torah, but the generic term for sacrifice is *korban* whose root means “to bring close” or “to be close.” The purpose of the sacrifices in ancient times was to draw close to G!d Who inspired a sense of awe. The preparation for offering sacrifices by the Kohanim, the priests, was going through ritual purification. The entire process was pervaded with a sense of holiness, which in Hebrew is called “*kedusha*.” I think it’s a relevant question whether our society has lost that sense of holiness in our lives in general. And too often the people we encounter who claim to have a sense of reverence in a religious context are intolerant of people who don’t share their religious beliefs

and practices. They too often negate secular life as a whole, rather than appreciating the great things about it while seeking to cultivate a spiritual lifestyle too. This is another area in which our society seems polarized.

The Torah is pretty preoccupied with the idea of holiness, of living a life that rises above the mundane, that finds the transcendent within the daily. Shabbat is a time of holiness, because it's separated from the weekday demands that draw our attention away from the transcendent.

In ancient times the Levites were dedicated to carrying out the rituals that attempted to draw holiness into people's lives. However, if you recall – this was not always successful. If it were always successful, then the Biblical prophets would not have criticized the people for offering sacrifices to G!d while their behavior towards other people was less than desirable. The prophets, the *nevi'im*, claimed that behavior that did not meet holy standards rendered sacrifices to G!d meaningless, even offensive. Also, in the book of Exodus which precedes Leviticus, we are told that we are to become a *mamlechet Kohanim*, a kingdom of priests, and an *am kadosh*, a holy people. We are all supposed to reach the level that the Kohanim, the priests, were supposed to be on.

In the year 70 C.E. things changed dramatically. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans. The sacrifices were only supposed to be offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Now there was a crisis in the religious lives of Jews. However, at this very period of time, the existence of synagogues was rising in ascendance, but synagogues were not places of sacrifice, but rather places of study of Torah and of prayer.

There's an important story found in Rabbinic literature that takes place right after the destruction of the Temple.

“Once, Rabban Yokhanan ben Zakkai was walking with his disciple, Rabbi Y'hoshua, near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Y'hoshua looked at the Temple ruins and said Oy for us! The place that atoned for the sins of the people Israel – through the ritual of animal sacrifice – lies in ruins. (By the way, what's the word for atonement? *Kippur* as in *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement). Then Rabbi Yokhanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: “Be not grieved, my son. There is another equally meritorious way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We can still gain atonement through deeds of lovingkindness.” For it is written in the prophet (Hosea/ Hoshea 6:6) “Lovingkindness I desire,

not sacrifice” *Khesed Khafatzti v’lo zevakh*. This story essentially captures the ascendance of a new era of Judaism – rabbinic Judaism.

People do find holiness in the sense of trying to bring goodness into the world and combating corruption, tyranny, bigotry, and inequality. I deeply believe that there is a need for holiness in our relationship with other people and also in cultivating our inner lives – the two are both essential for a full life. Even though we no longer can relate to the sacrifices mentioned in the book of Vayikra, we still can find ways of sanctifying our daily lives both in our relations with other people and in our relationship with the Eternal One. Shabbat Shalom.