

Parashat Vayikra 5780

Shabbat Shalom! I hope this finds everyone well and adjusting to our changed routines.

This Shabbat's Torah portion is *Vayikra*, the first *parasha* in the third book of the Torah which is called by the same name in Hebrew, *Vayikra*, and is called Leviticus in English. The name Leviticus comes from the word Levite, the tribe of the twelve tribes that was responsible for the ritual/spiritual lives of the ancient Jews. The Levites were the one tribe that was not given a portion of the Promised Land. They were supported by the rest of the people who did possess land. All the names of the twelve tribes come from the names of the sons of our patriarch Jacob. So the tribe of Levi comes from the name of the third son of Jacob with his wife Leah. Moses and Aaron were from the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi, the family of Aaron (Moses' older brother) became the Priestly caste (the *kohanim*, plural of *kohen* which means priest).

The book of Leviticus largely discusses the ritual obligations and tasks of the Levites and *kohanim*. Relevant to this, however is a statement in the book of Exodus (*Sh'mot*) that states that the Jewish people shall become a "Kingdom of Priests" and "a holy people." In this *parasha* various sacrifices that the *kohanim* would make are described. There were five different types of sacrifices: burnt offerings, meal offerings, sacrifices of well-being, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. They are described in considerable detail in the Torah portion. As I'm sure we've all noticed, sacrifices don't play a big role in synagogue services today. In fact they were beginning to be replaced by prayer even in the last few hundred years of the existence of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, (the *Beit HaMikdash*, as it's known in Hebrew). Sacrifices were only made at the *Beit HaMikdash* in Jerusalem and nowhere else in the country. However around the third century BCE, synagogues were coming into existence throughout the land of Israel. So by the time the second *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, it was a natural transition for the ancient sages to declare that prayer was the substitute for sacrifices.

The generic term for "sacrifice" in Hebrew is *korban*. The word *korban* has the three letter root (*kuf, resh, bet* – i.e. the "k," "r," and "b" sounds) that means to "draw near" or "bring close." In other words the act of offering something precious of one's own to G!d was meant as an expression of trying to draw close to the Eternal One. Most of the sacrifices were eaten with only part of the animal burnt, with the exception of the "burnt offering" which was entirely burnt. Even though we clearly no longer offer animal or even meal sacrifices, the concept of

sacrifice as a means of effecting change in our lives remains. The idea of a *korban*, a sacrifice, clearly expressed a great desire to connect with the Force, the Power, the Being that transcended our purely physical existence. Do people still feel that drive, that urge? Somehow I believe that people do, even if it's hard to articulate what that means. I believe the search for "meaning" in life is an expression of that desire, that inner need that most of us probably harbor. I believe that the creation of art of any form is also part of that great drive for meaning.

It seems that for many people the more traditional forms of expressing that desire for connecting to that which transcends ourselves has lost its impact. In a way you could say that the transition from sacrifices to prayer was an example of how the older form of connecting to the Transcendent (i.e. sacrifices) was replaced by a newer form (i.e. prayer). Our ancestors retained the drive to connect, but they required a new means. Interestingly, many of the words of the prayers come from passages of the *Tanakh* (the Bible). In fact the Levites used to chant Psalms in the *Beit HaMikdash*. (The Book of Psalms in the *Tanakh* is called *Tehilim* in Hebrew and is comprised of 150 Psalms. Psalms, *Tehilim*, means songs or poems of praise). In earlier times prayer services used to have an overall structure and order, but were also improvised by individuals, but as our ancestors became less adept at improvising their own words around the themes and structure of the services, prayer books (*siddurim*), with fixed formulations for the prayers came into being. The oldest prayer books that we have are from the late 800's to early 900's CE from Babylonia.

Prayer is characterized by our ancient sages as "the worship of the heart" (*avodah sheh'balev*). Another traditional description of prayer is termed "the pouring out of the soul" (*hishtapkhut hanefesh*) i.e. expressing our innermost feelings. Prayer can express gratitude; it can articulate our ideals, our hopes, our deepest inner feelings, our longing for connecting to the One. Prayer is an art, not a science. Like any art it requires an inner cultivation that comes with an engagement with it. It's a lifelong endeavor, just as it is a lifelong endeavor to try to connect to our own inner selves, and to attune ourselves to that part and level of our being. It can be done anywhere at any time with a scripted formula, as in a *siddur* (prayer book), or with our own spontaneous or improvised words. It can be done without words too as, for example, with melodies (*niggunim*) or with silence (as in meditation).

Though we live in a very materialistic world, I deeply believe that the need for meaning, and for transcendence - connection to that which is timeless - remains a real hunger in people's lives.

I will leave you with two phrases. The first is from a midrash to the book of Leviticus (*Vayikra*) which is called *Vayikra Rabba*. The phrase in the original Hebrew is: *de'ah kanita, meh khasarta, de'ah khasarta, mah kanita* (If you have acquired knowledge, what do you lack, and if you lack knowledge, what have you [truly] acquired?)

The second phrase is from Isaiah 11:9, which defines the kind of knowledge that is most prized by our tradition: *Ki mal'ah ha'aretz de'ah et Hashem kamayyim la'yam m'khasim* (For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Eternal One as the waters cover the sea).

Shabbat Shalom, take care and stay well.