

A Few Thoughts on Parashah Vayikra - Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26; Isaiah 43:21 - 44:23 – March 19, 2021

We have arrived at Leviticus, that book of complicated rules and regulations, many of which have lost their original relevance since the destruction of the second Temple in 70CE. The Hebrew name of this book is Vayikra, which means, And He (HaShem) Called. Like the names of all five books of the Torah, it derives from its opening words, whereas the Greek and Latin names describe the contents of each book. Indeed, the Book of Leviticus deals primarily with the law codes of the priestly clan. The *mishkan* is ready for use, the priests have been outfitted, and now, HaShem instructs Moses on the intricacies of performing the sacrificial offerings, which he in turn, must impart to the people. It is enormously difficult for us to fathom this long extinct world of animal and grain sacrifices, which entails creating some rather strange mixtures with the latter and a profusion of blood and entrails with the former. To our ancient ancestors, the *mishkan* was the link between the people and HaShem, and the priests were the conduits. There is no adequate way to express the fullness of what the word *korban*, usually translated as sacrifice or offering, meant in the ancient world. It derives from the root meaning to approach/to bring closer to and is related to words meaning interior/innards. Rabbi Jacob Milgrom z"l explained, "The quintessential act of sacrifice is the transference of property from the common to the sacred realm, thus making it a gift for God." We understand this through the word *mincha*, which refers to the grain (meal) offerings and means tribute or gift. Although the Israelites no longer subscribed to the pagan concept of offering physical sustenance to the gods in exchange for their beneficence, the general idea carried over into their sacrificial system. In the Torah, HaShem describes *korbanot* as "My bread, My food-gift, My sweet odor," etc., and the prophet Ezekiel calls the altar HaShem's "table." Feeding and appeasing our incorporeal, totally otherworldly God, however illogical it might seem to us, was nevertheless the only way our ancient ancestors understood how to relate to HaShem on a personal level. Giving something of value was – and still is – an affirmation that the object of our gift cares about us and will respond to our overtures of gratitude, supplication, or atonement. Our parashah defines five different offerings: OLAH (ascension) – burnt offering. This oldest, most common of all offerings was completely burnt on the altar to signify total submission to HaShem's will. MINCHA – meal offering. Unlike animal offerings, these belonged to the category of offerings made by human labor. Some of it was burnt, and the priests ate the rest. ZEVACH SH'LAMIM – peace offering. The words *shalom/shalem* mean peace/whole. These offerings were partially burnt, with a portion given to the priests and the rest to the donor and his family. They represent thanksgiving, free-will offerings, and offerings upon fulfillment of a vow. CHATAT – sin offering. A *cheyt* is a sin committed through carelessness or ignorance and pertains to communities as well as to individuals. On Yom Kippur we recite the long confession *al cheyt* several times throughout the day, mentioning every possible way we could be "missing the mark," which is exactly what this word means. The integrity of a community depends on the integrity of its individual members, which obligates us to be responsible for each other's sins. These offerings were mostly eaten by the priests. ASHAM – guilt offering. These are offered for having committed sins against sacred objects or spaces, either intentionally or by mistake, and for offences such as having sworn false oaths, robbery, defaulting on a pledge, or lying. Before making his offering, which was eaten by the priests, the offender had to make compensation to the wronged party. On Yom Kippur, the short confessional *ashamnu* precedes *al cheyt*.

Underlying the sacrificial system were two basic principles that still apply today: Public demonstrations of gratitude and remorse, and inclusion regardless of social standing. Offerings ranged from expensive bulls to small birds or grain, enabling everyone to participate without enduring undue financial hardship. This feeling of belonging was instrumental in creating and maintaining a cohesive society that not only required, but also valued, the contributions of everyone. Rabbi Shneer Zalman of Liadi z"l pointed out a grammatical detail in the second verse of our parashah, which exquisitely defines the true nature of sacrificial offering: *adam ki yakriv mikem* literally means, when one offers a sacrifice of you. In other words, we offer ourselves. To the ancients, it meant bringing a choice animal or portion of meal, often after having nurtured it from its birth or having grown, harvested, and ground it, watching it being slaughtered or prepared, and then depending on the offering, eating part of it together with family, or giving it to the priests to eat. The offering was always something of great value to the person presenting it, an external act that demonstrated a visceral understanding of our dependence on the mercy and generosity of HaShem. Replacing the ancient sacrificial offerings today are our prayers of gratitude and supplication, our financial contributions to individuals and institutions, and the time, talents, and energy we spend helping others and participating in acts of *tikkun olam*, of healing the world. In giving of ourselves, we affirm our gratitude to HaShem as well as our connection to HaShem's world and all it contains, a connection that reaches from the *mishkan* to our homes, our synagogues, and our social organizations.

Shabbat shalom!