

Parshat Vayikra: Is It A Sacrifice?

SECTION 1: THE PHILOSOPHY OF KORBANOT.

Does God need our sacrifices? That is one of the focal questions that we ask when approaching Parshat Vayikra. It is in this parsha that the sacrifices are introduced. We are given all the details and procedures for a guilt offering, a sin offering and the like. But we often find it difficult to connect with the very idea of an animal sacrifice. Does God want us to offer up lambs and sheep in His honour? Is that what God is about?

The mechanics and the metaphor of the sacrificial system are poorly understood in our times. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First; a time lapse. Jews have not practised the sacrificial rituals for over two thousand years. There is an enormous distance between our religious reality and the service of the sacrifices. After two millennia, Judaism has adapted itself to life without the Temple. Most Jews have no idea of what the Temple looked like or what went on there.

Additionally, the whole idea of animal sacrifice strikes us Westerners as primitive and even cruel. We do not like to think about animals being slaughtered, even if we eat meat ourselves. [3] That it could be holy is virtually unthinkable. The sacrificial system does not translate smoothly into a Twenty-First Century mindset.

There have been those who have suggested that the institution of sacrifices harks back to a world of widespread Paganism where sacrifices were a part of every religion. Judaism had to worship their God in the customary manner, however these practices do not constitute the core of Jewish ritual.[1] This approach is certainly not the predominant view amongst Jewish thinkers. From the Bible to the Middle Ages to modern times, Judaism has perceived the sacrifices as a positive phenomenon and the Mishna goes so far as to proclaim that: "The entire world exists by virtue of ... the Temple service." [2] Indeed we pray daily for the restoration of the Temple and its sacrifices.

What we shall attempt to do in this shiur is to put the concept of the sacrifice in its appropriate religious context and then attempt to look into the psychology of this ritual which hides a sensitivity to the subtleties of the human heart and the religiously attuned soul.

KAREV - DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

Even before we begin an investigation into sacrifices themselves, it would be worthwhile to dwell for a few moments on the word for sacrifice in Hebrew. That word is "korban". It derives from the root K-R-V which means, an approach, a movement of coming closer. A korban (sacrifice) then, is a means of drawing near. To whom? To what? To God. Here are the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch [4] on this topic.

"It is most regrettable that we have no word which

really reproduces the idea which lies in the expression "Korban". The unfortunate use of the term "sacrifice" implies the giving of something up that is of value to oneself for the benefit of another, or of having to do without something of value, ideas which are not only absent from the nature and idea of a Korban but are diametrically opposed to it....

KAREV means to approach, to come near, and so to get into a close relationship with somebody. This at once most positively gives the idea of the object and purpose of the process of KORBAN as the attainment of a higher sphere of life ... the (person) desires that something of himself should come closer to God, that is what his KORBAN is ..."

(Commentary to 1:2)

IN THE TANACH

If Korbanot are part of the mechanism for gaining greater closeness to God, then a good place to begin our investigation would be the Torah itself. In the Torah, korbanot are introduced to us as a most natural expression of the religious in man. Cain and Abel brought korbanot as an expression of their connection with God (Genesis 4:3). Noah, when he emerged from the Ark spontaneously offered a korban to God (8:18-21). The building of altars and the korbanot brought on them are standard practice for Abraham and the other Patriarchs. No command, no instruction preceded these offerings. From the perspective of the Torah, the act of animal offerings to God has been with us since the beginning of time. One might go a stage further and conclude that the act of a korban is innate to man. It is a most basic religious action, a fundamental spiritual expression.

To examine the issue of sacrifices from another angle, we must look into the writings of the Prophets. It has often been stated that the prophets opposed sacrifices. This is not an accurate representation of the message of the Prophets. What is correct is that if the Torah unreservedly relates to the bringing of korbanot as a positive act, the Prophets frequently criticise the rite of korbanot. Let us take one example:

"Hear the word of the Lord, you chieftains of Sodom;
Give ear to our God's instruction, you folk of Gomorrah!
'What need have I of your sacrifices?' says the Lord.
'I am sated with burnt offerings of rams, suet of fatlings,
blood of bulls;
And I have no delight in lambs and he-goats.
You come before Me-
Who asked this of you? You to trample my courtyards.
Bring no more false offerings; your incense is offensive to me.
New moon and Sabbaths, ... I cannot abide...
When you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length, I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with blood -
Wash yourselves clean; purify yourselves, put away your evil doings from my sight.
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good, devote yourselves to Justice;
Aid the wronged,
Uphold the cause of the orphan, defend the widow."
(Isaiah 1:10-17)

Here, sacrifices are viewed in a most negative light. They are a mode of worship that is abhorred, rejected and resented by God. What has happened? Let us examine the passage. Isaiah talks of Sodom and Amorrhah, two cities who were destroyed by

God for their inhospitality and sexual perversity. Here Israel are equated with those evil societies. Israel has become a cruel and oppressive culture that has no regard for the downtrodden, the orphans and widows – the people who live on the margins of society. But concurrently, while the evil, corruption and murder continue in the streets, the people of Israel still pray and raise their hands to God; they still bring sacrifices in the Temple. There is a startling disparity within the religious mindset of these people. Oppression and human suffering are not seen as God's domain, but the Temple and the sacrificial rite are where one may please God. It is towards this warped philosophy that God shows his utter disdain. One cannot ignore the moral teachings of God and then expect that a sacrifice will appease God Himself. That is paganism. The Jewish God is a moral God, in every walk of life.

The philosophy articulated here by Isaiah with fierce rhetoric, can be found in different forms in the writings of other prophets [5]. Attitudes to sacrifices in the Bible range from utter revulsion to praise and adulation. Everything depends on the all-important thoughts and context in which they are offered. Sacrifices are not the feeding of animals to into the jaws of a bloodthirsty deity to keep him happy. As we have explained, korbanot are part of a system. If one is already involved in a relationship with God, a struggle of body and soul, a yearning for the spirit, a commitment to morality, then sacrifices sacrifice nothing; rather, they assist and accelerate ones journey towards God. Korbanot are part of an intricate system of closeness to the word of God and the morality of God. Korbanot are not a replacement for morality or a substitute for correct ethical conduct.

"This is one of the points in which Judaism and Paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The Pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering he wishes himself subservient to the wishes of God." (Commentary of Rabbi Hirsch to Lev. 10:1)

KORBANOT, THE SYMBOLIC GESTURE AND FLOWERS

Sometimes, when I teach this to my students, I talk about the notion of expressing feelings, emotions, through tangible objects, and through symbolic gestures of "giving." An example will best illustrate what I mean.

There are many occasions in life when we give someone flowers. In each circumstance, the flowers might be the same, but the inner meaning is very different. If a government greets a visiting World Leader, a VIP, at the airport, they might greet them with a large bunch of flowers. What they wish to say is "We honour you!" If I spend a Shabbat meal at someone's home, I might send flowers. In that case, I am saying; "Thank you for your hospitality." I may send 12 red roses to my beloved, to say "I love you!" or to a patient in hospital to say "Get well soon, I care about you" or flowers on the grave of the Unknown Soldier, which say "We salute you!"

What I mean to say is that: 1. Sometimes to express emotions we need to manifest our very abstract, ephemeral emotions upon a very tangible this-worldly object. By the giving of this object we convey the feelings we have in a more forceful and real manner, giving form and substance to our inner thoughts. 2. A second point is that this act of giving, this symbolic gesture can come in different forms for different sentiments, moods, or states of mind. The object might be different (red rose, a wreath of poppies, etc.) and the manner of giving, the ceremony, the process, may be different.

I feel that korbanot are a classic example of this type of symbolic language, as we shall explain. And this is precisely the reason that the prophets scoffed at the person who does the outward act without the inner sincerity, who performs the gesture despite the fact that his inner voice was expressing a very different message.

Read on

SECTION 2: PARASHAT VAYIKRA AND THE FIVE CLASSIC TYPES OF KORBANOT.

Let us look at the Parsha itself and attempt to demonstrate some of the spiritual messages that the sacrificial system teaches. Our Parsha contains a straightforward listing of the details and procedures of five major types of korban. Here is the list:

I. OPTIONAL (self-motivated) KORBANOT

Chap 1 -	OLAH :	the burnt offering
Chap 2 -	MINCHA :	a flour offering
Chap 3 -	SH'LAMIM :	peace offering

II. MANDATORY KORBANOT

4:1-5:13 -	CHATAT :	sin offering
5:14-5:26 -	ASHAM :	guilt offering

We can see from the very simple division between the first and second section, that there are times when a person brings a korban out of choice and there are other times when a person is obliged to do so.

OLAH AND SHELAMIM

Let us begin with the voluntary offerings. Sometimes a person is moved religiously. They wish to connect with God. They are simply a good Jew looking for greater spirituality and meaning. How might they connect with the almighty? Can they express their feelings to God? What IS the symbolic gesture, the "flowers" that they might offer God?

In truth there are two basic models of voluntary korban:

1. Olah - animal entirely consumed on the altar
2. Shelamim - eaten by the owners (after the blood and fat has been brought to the altar)

Why are two models offered? Apparently, these two different offerings suggest two contrasting approaches (korban) to God, two mindsets, two emotions.

The OLAH is completely consumed. It is given over in its entirety to God. Olah means "raised up", "elevation". The Olah represents very similar emotions to those that we shall elaborate regarding the sin offering, only that this offering is initiated by the giver, by the individual. One sees a living bleating animal reduced to nothing, ashes in a fleeting moment! To explain the concept of Olah, a historical Biblical example can be used [6].

The first example of a korban Olah is the Korban of Noah as he emerges from the ark into the desolate post-deluvian world. What mood is Noah expressing here? Is he expressing a prayer of thanks? Or maybe trying to make a statement of despair amidst the ruins of the "old world"? We don't know. But we can intuit that the entire mood of this moment was one of God's enormous power which overwhelms and overpowers man in his helplessness and insignificance. An animal is

brought as an Olah, and is fully consumed before God. Living creatures are “as a broken pottery shard, as a passing shadow, as a fleeting dream. But you - God - are the true king, the life source, ever-existing.” (... to paraphrase our Yamim Noraim davening.) Noah takes of the “survivors,” the pitiful few animals to survive the flood, and offers it to God. Is he expressing a further point of his own significance to God? - as if to say: “Why did I deserve to survive? - after all who am I?”

In a more similar situation, another survivor’s tale, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son (Genesis Ch. 22.) He is commanded to offer Isaac as an OLAH. Later God tells him not to touch the child. Abraham, spotting a ram amidst the brush, offers up the ram in the place of his son. Does the ram replace his son? Could anything take his place? - Of course not! The ram could not possibly represent to Abraham that which his son - the son of his longing - meant to him. But the ram was a symbol. It was a symbol of Abraham’s uncompromising and total commitment to God to the point where had God demanded it (He didn’t!), he would have even given to Him his own son. This strange incident represents the mindset of the OLAH. It is one of total dedication.

So Olah is about man’s insignificance in the face of the greatness of God. Man’s fleeting existence in the face of the Almighty. And the product of this realisation is the notion of total and even selfless dedication, motivated by that feeling and understanding of the awe-inspiring grandeur and unequalled power of God. OLAH says that one wishes to devote oneself absolutely, exclusively, completely to God.

SHELAMIM is from the word “shalom” - peace. It is eaten by the owners of the korban, in Jerusalem. How can we have an offering to God which is eaten by human beings? The key to understanding the shelamim is a word which is used to describe this sacrifice throughout the Bible. It is described as “zevach” (3:1) - The “zevach shelamim”. What is the meaning of this terminology? A zevach is a feast of meat, a shared meal (See Genesis 31:44-46, I Samuel 28:24, I Kings 1:9). It is a banquet between two parties who are expressing their friendship and peace.

If we can be so crude as to describe God in “human” terms, we might say that the Shelamim is a joint meal between man and God. It represents a feeling of calm and harmony between God and man - a “shelamim” - sense of peace. In this korban we “share” a meal with God. The altar takes a part of the animal but the owners eat the other section in the shadow of God’s Temple in Jerusalem. Indeed, the shelamim was often brought to celebrate festive occasions (the “thanksgiving” offering - korban todah- was a shelamim) and would invite friends and family to celebrate a marriage, a birth, and thank God for the goodness that he had bestowed upon them. The SHELAMIM is vastly different to the Olah. Here there is a togetherness with God, but there is no fear, no sacrifice. Instead, there is overwhelming joy and gratitude. A feeling of a caring, close God. Maybe the most famous “shelamim” is the Paschal Lamb. It celebrates God’s gracious salvation of our entire nation. We celebrate as a nation, we recite the Hallel. We thank God for the kindness he has bestowed upon us.

If I could think of a neat way to summarise this dichotomy between the Olah and Shelamim, I would label them as:

Olah - Yirat Hashem (Man’s insignificance in the face of God)

Shelamim - Ahavat Hashem (Man’s significance, indeed, his intimate relationship with the God who is close at hand.)

CHATAT – SIN OFFERING

Let us continue to the second section; the Obligatory Korbanot that are required if one has sinned. In the case of transgression a person is allowed to bring a korban. It is significant to note that one can never bring a korban for a deliberate transgression. Korbanot are only an option for an unintentional sin. For example, if a person ate meat believing that it was kosher and later found out that it was pork, he would be required to bring a “sin offering” but an individual who deliberately denies Kashrut (the Jewish dietary regulations) is not given that option.

This fact alone demonstrates that the sacrifice does not function as a carte blanche, allowing one to gain automatic allowance for human weakness. An individual who transgresses a law knowingly will receive his just desserts. But someone who sins through ignorance or negligence is a different story. As we shall see, the Korban aims to educate the person and jolt his consciousness.

EMOTIONAL UPHEAVAL

What does a korban do to a person? What is the effect of bringing an animal to the Temple and offering it up to God? Rav Soloveichik, in a highly forceful emotive passage, tries to explain the psychological impact of the experience:

“The Torah forbade all human sacrifice. The example it uses to describe the abomination of idol-worship is “for even their sons and daughters they consume with fire on behalf of their gods” (Deut 12:31). Yet, although the Torah forbade human offerings, it did not invalidate the IDEA behind it that man sacrifice his own self - “that it is proper that (man) spill his blood and burn his flesh (cf. Nachmanides, Leviticus 1:9) - rather than just bring a bull or two pigeons ... God does not seek offerings from man, he seeks man himself.

... In a world of strict justice, the only acceptable way is for man to sacrifice himself. When man sins... he loses his most elementary right, the right to his own self. “For on the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:17). Sin- means death. The quality of strict justice is never willing to concede...

When a man brings a sacrifice after having sinned, he must imagine that it is he himself who is being offered upon the altar. When the blood of the animal is sprinkled, he must imagine that it is his own blood that is being sprinkled - that his own hot blood which in his passion drew him to sin, is being sprinkled upon the altar of his sin; that the fats which are consumed on the altar are not the animal’s, but his own fats, which congealed in his heart and gave him over to the hands of sin. Only by virtue of God’s august mercy is man redeemed from having to sacrifice himself, for it is God who arranged for a ram to take the place of Isaac. It is for this reason that it is always the Ineffable name of God (the Tetragrammaton - indicating God’s attribute of mercy and forgiveness) that appears in the context of sacrifices - for the quality of divine mercy is revealed in the sacrificial rites.” (On Repentance. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik pg.266-268)

What Rav Soloveichik tells us is that sacrifices are not for the weak hearted. He informs us that sacrifices SHOULD be a raw, startling event. They are meant to disturb. They are designed to shake a person up and examine the very foundation of their existence on earth and their purpose on this planet. Korbanot

begin a thought process of self-examination and self-scrutiny. By what right do I live? What drives the life force within me?

BLOOD AND FAT

It is not incidental that all Korbanot share the fact that the two elements of the animal are brought to the altar. Some sacrifices are eaten by the priests or the owners of the sacrifice, but still, the same two essential parts of the animal will constitute the central ritual of the korban. These are the blood of the animal and the fat of the animal. These elements are always the prime elements of a korban. Why? The blood is the life force. "For the blood is the soul" (Deut 1:23). Blood is perceived as that which drives a person forward, pumping through his veins, giving energy and life. Fat is the complete opposite. Fat slows us down. Fat is a store of energy that we carry with us, but in the meantime, it makes us more sluggish. Blood is the get up and go within us, the active, the single minded goodness. Fat is the lazy, the compromising, the desire to be comfortable, secure. Both these primal elements of our being are dedicated to God.

Interestingly enough, the section of the details of the korbanot is interrupted by a law which tells us that both of these parts of an animal are forbidden to a Jew (See next week's parsha 7:22-27). We are forbidden to consume blood and fat even if they come from a kosher animal. The reason should be clear. These two parts of the animal represent the dialectic that is life. One must treat this capsule of what is life with due respect.

CONCLUSION

We have, then, developed three models of sacrifices, or rather korbanot. I say "korbanot" for these three types, in truth, represent three prime religious emotions, three fundamental but very different approaches to God. The sin offering, with its introspection and alarming message of awakening. The Olah, brought out of personal religious initiation, suffused with awe and trembling and a feeling of absolute dedication and self-negation before God. The Shelamim, expressing harmony and thanks to God, amidst feasting and rejoicing.

The korbanot then, are a tool for giving expression to some familiar and frequently felt religious feelings. Only that here we have a means whereby to focus and actualise those emotions, and a place (the Beit Mikdash) which is pre-designed to accommodate and highlight those aspects of our spiritual personality.. We have discovered that far from being a primitive pagan rite, the korbanot are aimed at emphasising key human religious emotions, often giving expression to the subtle nuances of our spiritual life.

Shabbat Shalom.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Maimonides in his Guide to the Perplexed 3:46 . See the next footnote too.

[2] This statement comes from the Avot 1:2. It is interesting that Maimonides in his halachik work, the Mishne Torah, quotes this statement in his defence of the importance of sacrifices. See Hilchot Me'ila 8:8. This would seem to contradict his explanation in Guide to the Perplexed. It is difficult to decipher Maimonides and to work out which view is more authoritative.

[3] I have not dealt directly with the criticism of Korbanot from

the direction of animal rights. I will simply comment here that most people in the civilised world eat meat, and if they do not eat meat, the vast majority wear leather shoes, clothing etc. As far as the moral argument is concerned, if we can put our culinary or clothing needs above the value of animal life, then by the same token at least, our religious demands should surely permit us to take the life of an animal!

[4] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1800-1888) was one of the predominant Orthodox Rabbis in 19th Century enlightened Germany.

He was an unapologetic representative of Orthodox Judaism in the face of attacks from the academic world and the growing movement of Reform. His entire commentary to the Torah aims to demonstrate the intellectual and moral sophistication of the Torah, as opposed to the views of his detractors who saw it as an ancient relic of darker times. His commentary on the entire Temple ritual is especially significant in this respect and if you read his comments on the first chapter of Vayikra, it reads almost as a polemic against the "enlightened" critics of his age.

[5] See : Samuel I 15:22, Jeremiah 7:21-23, Psalms 50:12-13, Hosea 6:7.

[6] See Joshua Berman. The Temple - Its symbolism and meaning. Chapter 6 and especially pg.123.