

## *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality* (Portion of Vayikra)

From Rav Binny Freedman

*Human beings are like no other animal, in that we will sometimes go against every natural instinct for reasons that often remain beyond the definable. We will give away our food, despite being hungry, when others are in need. We will give another our coat, in the midst of winter, despite the bitter cold, because someone else is suffering. And we will feel good about this, even better than had we eaten the food or retained the clothing ourselves.*

*Half an hour's walk from the gates of the old city of Jerusalem lays a hill which today sits in the heart of the Ramat Eshkol neighborhood of Jerusalem. Situated overlooking the main road from the Damascus gate, so named because it was the major artery from Jerusalem all the way to Damascus, the average visitor will miss this little hill, unless he knows what he is looking for. Even from the air, this small hill can easily be missed.*

*But to any Israeli paratrooper and for that matter any Israeli who knows the story of the Six-day war, this strategic bump on the topography of the map, is no ordinary hill; known as Ammunition Hill, its legend has made it a towering mountain.*

*In June of 1967, after years of regular mortar, sniper, and shell-fire from the Jordanian-held part of Jerusalem into the Western Israeli-held part of the city, the Israelis finally decided it was time to come home, and plans to re-take the Old City were implemented.*

*For nineteen years, a wall of barbed wire and mine fields had cut a wedge through the City of Gold, and Jews all over the world had dreamed of the day they would once again be free to wander in to the ancient alleyways of the Old city, or climb the hills of Hebrew University: Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives.*

*But in order to free the Old city the IDF first had to take command of all the strategic vantage points in the hills around her. The prophets described Jerusalem as a city of "Harim Saviv Lah", a city surrounded by hilltops, and the Old city, which sits on a smaller hill below, was strategically unapproachable, unless the army could first wrest control of the surrounding mountains from the Jordanians.*

*In the middle of the night, advanced columns of armor, supporting paratrooper infantry units, advanced towards the fortifications of Ammunition Hill. But before long, the tanks became hopelessly ensnared in the minefields and obstacles at the base of the hill, and the paratroopers had to proceed alone.*

*Under heavy fire they made it into the Jordanian trenches and bunkers that dotted the top of the hill.*

*The Jordanians had done their homework well, and had created a response to the Israeli system of trench warfare. The norm under such conditions is to take the trenches, bunker-by-bunker, and corner-by-corner, with one man crouching along the trench wall covering his advancing comrades, who moved past him in the trenches. So the Jordanians designed the trenches connecting the bunkers to be so narrow, that only one man could fit in its width; there was no room to cover one's comrade. The Israelis adapted to the situation by having the man firing in front throw himself on the ground as soon as his ammo ran out and allowing everyone else to trample past on top of him!*

*Things soon came to a head, however, as the Israelis in the trenches came under murderous fire from the Jordanian police tower at the top of the hill. Crouched down in the trenches and unable to return accurate*

*fire, the Jordanians began to lob grenades into the trenches, decimating the Israeli troops. Realizing the implications, one of the men jumped out of the trench and began to return fire, running alongside the men in the trenches below to cover their advance.*

*It didn't take the Jordanians long to cut this soldier down, again exposing the Israeli troops in the trenches, whereupon another paratrooper immediately jumped up out of the trench to take up a covering position, again running alongside the men. And every time the Jordanians succeeded in cutting down the man above the trenches, another Israeli soldier would jump up to take his place, and all this without ever being ordered to do so. In the aftermath of that battle the men tried to recall if any of the commanders had actually asked for volunteers for this suicidal mission, but none could recall any such orders or requests being given.*

*By nightfall, Ammunition Hill was in Israeli hands, and the taking of this strategic position was what allowed for the Jewish people, after two thousand years of dreaming, to come home at last to the Old City, and the Kotel, the Western Wall. One wonders how men of flesh and blood, with all the normal fears and challenges we all share every day, should so succeed in rising above their physical reality and reaching such a level of sacrifice and determination. And one wonders as well, why G-d always seems to need such painful and challenging sacrifices.*

Sacrifice: a loaded word to say the least. This week's portion, *VaYikra*, introduces what is essentially an entire book of the Torah almost completely dedicated to the concept of sacrifices in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and later the Temple. Nearly a quarter of the Torah is dedicated, apparently to the how, when, where and what of animal offerings.

One wonders, if the Torah is meant to be relevant to every Jew, in every generation, what on earth this has to do with our lives in the twenty first century.

It is quite easy to fathom what the value of many of the mitzvot in the Torah have for us today: how beautiful the experience of loving one's fellow human being, making the choice to desist from gossip and slander, respecting one's parents, and even discovering, through the experience of Shabbat, the value and the power of learning to live in the moment and put the week's accomplishments into perspective, can be.

But are we expected to discover the meaning of life by contemplating the ritual slaughter of cows and sheep, and the burning of their carcasses or the sprinkling of their blood on the altar in the Temple? Images of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, with glassy-eyed supplicants chanting to an unseen deity as the fire consumes the ritual sacrifices while priests in strange garb burn incense and exhort the people to repent their evil deeds do not give most of us that warm and fuzzy feeling we might get when we light Chanukah candles. So what are these animal sacrifices really all about?

The **Ramban** (Nachmanides) here suggests that the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *Korban*, comes from the root '*Karov*' to be close, because the aim of the sacrifices or Korbanot is to bring us closer to G-d. But how does slaughtering and burning animals bring us closer to G-d?

Further, the verses suggest in many places that somehow, the sacrifices burning on the altar were a "pleasing (or satisfying) aroma before G-d. (A "*Reyach Nichoach La'Hashem*" 3:5.) What does this mean? Does G-d need our sacrifices? Why would we want a relationship with a G-d that expects us to offer up His dinner?

And for that matter, how can G-d smell? If G-d (as Maimonides suggests) cannot be physical (because anything physical is by definition limited....), then how can G-d have a physical experience? And if

already we are describing how our sacrifices impact G-d, why is smell the sense of choice? Why doesn't the smoke of the sacrifice *appear* beautiful to G-d (elsewhere we find G-d *seeing*, as an example, the suffering of the Jewish people in Egypt.) or taste wonderful to G-d? After all, as wonderful as the smell of a good barbeque may be, certainly this is only as an enticement to the eventual taste of a good steak! So why is the *smell* of the sacrifices so often stressed?

**Maimonides**, (the Rambam) in his *Guide to the Perplexed* (The *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:32) suggests a rather challenging way of understanding the basis for sacrifices in the Torah, explaining that the purpose of the sacrifices was essentially to keep us from falling back into the culture of idolatry. Although the Jewish people had left Egypt, that did not mean that they had necessarily left Egypt behind, and the lust for animal offerings to the pagan gods was still very much a part of their psyche. As such, suggests the Rambam, it was better for the people to be offering sacrifices to G-d, rather than have them fall back into the idolatrous practices they were meant to have left behind.

This is nothing short of incredible! An entire book of the Torah is dedicated to this topic, which contains an enormous wealth of detail and complexity, and all this is so that the Jews leaving Egypt would have a healthier outlet for their desire to continue slaughtering and burning animals?

And even if this is indeed so, what relevance would this then have for us today? Clearly, a lack of sacrifices has not led us down the path of idolatry!

The **Ramban**, who himself describes the sacrifices as one of the essential and basic components of Judaism, says nonetheless that the understanding of sacrifices is a "*Sod Ne'elam*", a hidden secret, implying that the full understanding of the mystical concepts and implications of the sacrifices is beyond our grasp. This at least suggests that there is a basic and powerful idea to the offering of sacrifices, though its full understanding might elude our grasp.

But according to the **Rambam**, (Maimonides), if the sacrifices were simply to help us get rid of our idolatrous urges, what relevance would they have for us today, that explains why we will spend the next three months reading about them, in every Synagogue in the world?

Further, one would imagine that according to the Rambam, one day, when we rebuild the third Temple, we will not need sacrifices, as we will have long since done away with the desire to offer sacrifices to pagan gods.

However, Maimonides states very clearly (*Hilchot Melachim* 11:1) that when we once again re-establish the royal house of David and the King (Moshiach) arrives, we will once again re-institute the practice of sacrifices in the Temple, implying that they are in fact an integral part of Judaism, and not at all a necessary compromise with the pagan world. And the Rambam himself also says (in the end of *Hilchot Me'ilah*) that the Sages said that the world exists for the sake of the Korbanot (sacrifices). So which is it? Are sacrifices basic to Judaism or not? And if they are, what is their role?

Indeed, as the Ramban points out, Cain and Abel (*Genesis* 4) offered sacrifices long before there was (at least according to biblical text) even an issue of idolatry. So if sacrifices are only to prevent us from idol-worship, what is the meaning of sacrifices long before the concept of idols was even born?

It is also interesting to note that the name of G-d used in the context of sacrificial offerings, according to the **Sefat Emet**, is always Hashem (the *Yud*, the *Heh*', the *Vav*, and the *Heh*', which the Christians refer to as Yahweh....), and never Elokim. Why?

Lastly, the Talmud suggests that although we have no sacrifices today without a Temple, prayer actually takes the place of the sacrifices. Indeed, we pray in the morning and the afternoon as a direct parallel to the morning and afternoon sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. But what does prayer have to do with sacrifices?

And if the sacrifices were meant to distance us from idolatry, how does prayer serve as an adequate substitute?

It seems there are really two things that we need to clarify: what exactly are sacrifices, and why is idolatry so much of an anathema to Judaism that these same sacrifices which are seemingly meant to prevent us from falling back into idolatry, receive so much attention?

Sacrifices have been around since the dawn of man. Cain and Abel, as we mentioned, offered up sacrifices to G-d long before we struggled, so it seems with idolatry, and the first thing Noach did when he alighted from the ark at the end of the flood, was to build an altar and offer up sacrifices.

Why? What is it Abel, Cain, and Noah were all trying to say, when they offered up their sacrifices to G-d? If the act of sacrifice is a form of thanking G-d (i.e. Noach is thanking G-d for being spared), or even a form of appreciation, why does a man who is trying to say thank you immediately take an animal slaughter it, and burn it for G-d? What does this act have to do with saying thank you? And, incidentally, it is again worth noting, that when Noach offers his sacrifices (Genesis 8:20-21) Hashem “*smells the pleasing aroma of the sacrifices*”, here again we find the *Reyach Nichoach*, the pleasing aroma, associated with the sacrifices. What is this idea of sacrifices all about, and how does it relate to idolatry?

*Avodah Zara* (idolatry) is actually one of only three transgressions (along with murder and adultery), which are considered in Jewish tradition to be “*Yehareg Ve’Al Ya’avor*”, or transgressions one should be willing to die for, rather than transgress.

Now, it is easy to understand why I should be willing to give up my own life, rather than be forced to murder another. After all, as the Talmud points out, who am I to say that “my blood his redder than his” (my life is more important than someone else’s)? And even adultery is an action one can understand as being beyond the pale.

But why is idolatry included in this grouping? Can I really transgress idolatry if I am under duress? I may be bowing down to the idol, but if, in my heart it is still just a carved piece of wood, then what have I really done? Obviously, idolatry is so at odds with Judaism that even the suggestion of it is enough to be willing to die for. So what is idolatry, really?

Idolatry is the worship of nature: the power of nature, the beauty of nature, and even the cruelty of nature. Essentially, the idolater worships all things physical. Hence sexual immorality and the worship of the body was an integral part of ancient pagan practice. (As witness the Greeks, and even the sin of the Golden calf wherein the Jews “*get up to laugh*” (Exodus 32:6), which the rabbis understand to mean that the Jews, at Sinai, sunk into an orgy.)

There are two aspects that make up who we are. There is the part of us that is physical, even animal. We are, on one level, the same as animals, with the same need to eat and sleep, and attend to our physical needs. From this perspective we are, in the end, physical and limited beings with temporal existences in this world.

But then there is that part of us that extends far beyond the physical; that part of us that strives to reach out to a reality that is endless; a reality with no limits. This is the spiritual part of our makeup, what we often call 'the soul'. It is that aspect of our makeup that attaches itself to and experiences the One, the Endless One. It is the part of who we are that has the capacity to love, and to give, and to care, and to experience purpose, and to be partners in bringing G-d into the world.

Indeed, the ancient pagans became so immersed in the physical world, that there was no longer any room for G-d in the world. Such a world no longer has a reason to exist, hence the flood.

And we often become so immersed in the physical reality that surrounds us that we actually come to view this experience as the essence of reality, forgetting that the physical world is merely an extension of true reality, which is G-d, who really runs the world.

This then, is the purpose of the Korbanot, the sacrifices. When we become too immersed in that physical reality; when our desires rule us, instead of the other way round, then we are dangerously close to the world of pagan idolatry where the physical world of lust and desire is the only reality. And that is when we offer up the animal, representing both the animal within us, as well as the physical world around us, to remind us what this world is really all about. This, perhaps, is what Maimonides was really talking about.

**Rav Aviner** in his *Tal Chermon*, (quoting the **Maharit** in his *Tzafnat Paneach*) suggests that Maimonides was not describing what sacrifices *were* (in explaining them as allowing us to remove pagan idolatry from our lives), but rather, he was suggesting what a world *without* sacrifices would be like.

That world would be headed in the same direction man was sinking into before the flood: a world that was all about the physical.

We become so immersed in the world around us that we assume what we do is what really runs the world. But in reality, all of that is only an illusion; in reality, while G-d wants us to be His partners in running the world, it is really Hashem who causes all things to be, and on whom it all depends.

Imagine you are test-driving a new car and a teenage spirit takes hold of you, and you decide to floor it, just to see what this baby can do. And imagine, G-d forbid, that as this brand new sports car hits ninety miles an hour, someone is crossing the street, and you can't stop in time, and he or she is instantly killed on impact. You will go through the rest of your life carrying this guilt with you; if only you hadn't acted so rashly, this person would still be alive, right?

And yet that is ridiculous. The idea that we can decide whether someone will live or die is not only incorrect, it is ludicrous; we don't control life and death; only G-d does. And if someone dies, it is because Hashem has decided it is their time; if your number is up, then your number is up; you could be sitting in your living room and have a piece of a 747 jet explode through your rooftop (as happened in Queens, NY a few years ago). Conversely, if it isn't your day to die, you can sit in a Pizzeria when a suicide bomber blows the place to pieces, and walk out without a scratch. And that has nothing to do with you; it is simply Hashem's decision for reasons that will most probably elude us forever.

The only part of this world that we control is how we choose to view things, and what our desires are. As we learned in *Parshat VaYakhel* two weeks ago, even the sin of the Golden calf was meant to be; G-d could have let the people know Moshe would be returning the next afternoon! What we need to atone for is not what we have done wrong, but what we *wanted* to do. Our desires are that part of reality that Hashem allows us to control.

And this is really the essence of the sacrifices: what do we desire? Do we allow ourselves to be animals, letting our physical desires rule us? Or do we strive to a higher level? The sacrifices then, are an opportunity to put things back into perspective, to recognize that we need to put the animal within us back in its place.

And this as well is the reason prayer today stands in for the sacrifices, because this is what prayer is all about.

People often think that we pray for G-d, but G-d does not need our prayers any more than He needs our sacrifices. The tefillot (prayers) we offer are clearly not for G-d, they are for us. When we pray we have a chance to tap in to what we are really all about.

There is a tradition (halachah) that when we pray the silent (*shemoneh esrei*) prayer (which forms the basis of all our prayers), we are told to actually verbalize our prayers, at least loud enough so we can hear them. This is not so G-d can hear our prayers; it is, rather, so we can hear our prayers. Do we hear what we are praying for? Have we stopped to consider what we really want in this world? And most of all, are we happy with what we want? Is what we want, what Hashem wants us to want?

Because this is really the goal: “*Aseh Retzono’ Retzonchah*” Make Hashem’s will your will. Can I want what Hashem wants me to want, or do I get stuck wanting all the illusions that we are so immersed in all the time. This then, is the gift of the sacrifices, which allow me to re-connect with what life is really meant to be about.

This was Cain’s struggle, when he began to farm the land, and became so immersed in that physical world, that he began to forget where all that bounty really comes from. In his struggle, he offers up his vegetables as an offering, in a way letting go of that physical world, and yet, he does not offer up the best of his fruits (as Abel does in offering the best of his flocks), because he cannot quite let go.

Noach as well, about to immerse himself in the physical world of planting and rebuilding, having just seen an entire world destroyed, (implying there is no purpose to all of this physical reality,) and yet, (perhaps to counteract that) having just spent a year in an ark full of animals, which is an incredibly intense physical experience, may perhaps be struggling the same struggle. This, perhaps, is why he builds an altar, as an attempt to recall what life is really meant to be.

And this is perhaps why the sacrifices are always offered to Hashem (the *Yud*, the *Heh’*, the *Vav*, and the *Heh’*, which the Christians refer to as Yahweh....). Because this name refers to that aspect of Hashem that is completely beyond my comprehension; these letters form as well the words past present and future (Hayah Hoveh, Ve’Ye’hiyeh: the G-d who was, is, and always will be.) This is the G-d who is above and beyond time; the G-d we can never fully comprehend because He is all of reality. This, then, is the G-d I wish to re-connect with when I offer up a sacrifice. Because I have become so used to Elokim, (which is that aspect of Hashem that invites me to be His partner in building the world) and have become so immersed in my partnership in this world that I have forgotten who really runs the show. And when I start to think it is about my physical needs, and me, then the opportunity for korbanot enters into play.

This is the idolatrous way of looking at the world that sacrifices come to avoid. And at the same time, this, says Judaism, is the basis of everything, to the extent that it is really beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Maybe this is the *Reyach Nichoach*: the pleasing aroma, of the sacrifices. Jewish tradition suggests, smell is the only one of the senses that was not implemented in the sin of Adam and Eve. In the process of

coming to eat (and **taste** of the tree of knowledge, Eve **saw** it (and was enticed by it), she **touched** it (and saw she did not die...), and they both subsequently **heard** G-d in the garden. So four of the senses: Taste, Sight, Touch, and Hearing were all employed, but Smell was not.

As such, the mystics suggest, smell is the only one of the senses to remain as it was originally in the Garden of Eden. It is the sense that takes us back to the way it was meant to be (hence we smell the spices as we conclude Shabbat at Havdallah, to take the fragrance of Shabbat, which is a small window into the world to come as it was in the Garden, into the week, and the physical world that lies ahead.)

Smell then, represents that physical reality, which is nonetheless somewhat intangible; it is not something we can hold, or fully grasp. Just like the world we are trying to recapture, which has G-d the unfathomable at its center, instead of all the physical things that are so tangible, and yet in the end, an illusion.

If this is what sacrifices are really all about, then they have never been more relevant.

Perhaps, one day soon, we will succeed, both as a people, and then as a world, in recalling what is real, and what is only an illusion, so that we can build the world as it was always meant to be.

Shabbat Shalom,  
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