

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 cannot be explained. 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 sometimes, we will sacrifice everything for something greater than 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, 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.

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, rose above their physical reality and reached such a level of determination and sacrifice. 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 to the how, when, where and what of animal offerings.

If the Torah is meant to be relevant to every Jew, in every generation, what on earth are we meant to do with sacrifices, in the twenty first century?

*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?

***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, of what relevance would this then have for us today? Clearly, a lack of sacrifices has not led us down the path of idolatry!

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 Noah 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. Noah 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 Noah 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.

It is interesting to note that idol-worship is one of only three transgressions (along with murder and adultery) 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 is 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?

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 were an integral part of ancient pagan practice.

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 needs 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 aspect 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, to give, to care, and to experience purpose; all the human experiences that have no limits.

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 animal world of what we 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.

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...

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 are an opportunity to put things back into perspective, to recognize that we need to put the animal within us back in its place.

This then, is the gift of the sacrifices, which allow me to re-connect with what life is really meant to be about, and to let go of the illusions that we are so immersed in all the time.

*Maybe this is the Reyach Nichoach: the pleasing aroma, of the sacrifices. Because smell is the only one of the senses that was not, suggests Jewish tradition, 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, such an illusion.

And of course, if this is what sacrifices are really all about, then they have never been more relevant.

Fifty years ago, on a barren windswept hill overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem, a small band of Israeli Paratroopers remembered what really matters in this world and themselves became the sacrifice, reminding us to see a reality so much bigger than our limited animal needs and desires, and in so doing, changed history...

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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