

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	KETUVIM
Vayikra	16 Mar., 2019	9 Adar II 5779	Lev. 1:1-5:26	1Sam 15:2-34	Mark 6:14-29

Last week, we concluded the reading of *Sefer Shemot* (Book of Exodus) with the completion and dedication of the Tabernacle. Now Hashem has a place in this world (Exo. 40:34). The significance of this event is that man has moved over and made room for a world with Hashem in it. This is why He took Yisrael out of Egypt in the first place, and this was the whole goal of creation.

This week's Torah portion Vayikra (Leviticus) is also known as *Torat Kohanim* (the instruction of the priests). This portion is occupied with the aspect of the Divine service which takes place in the Tabernacle known as *korbanot* (offerings). Today's parashat deals with the detailed requirements of the *korbanot*. There are laws that apply to specific offerings and general principles that apply to all the service of the offerings. Here are four types of offering:

1. The laws of the *olah* (עֹלָה, burnt) is an offering brought from cattle, sheep or fowl that is burned completely on the altar, none of it being consumed by any man; (Ch. 1)
2. The *mincha* (מִנְחָה, grain) offering, brought from plants; (Ch. 2)
3. The *shelamim* (שְׁלָמִים, peace) offerings also brought from cattle, sheep or goats; (Ch. 3)
4. And various types of *chatat* (חַטָּאת, sin) offerings, brought to address the spiritual damage caused by inadvertent sin. (Ch. 4, 5, 6)

What is the difference between Hashem's offering and pagan sacrifices? A pagan sacrifice is a man-made ritual of fear and death. It is a way to bribe their deity bent on the torture of man. It is a fragmented view of the world, selfish, and egocentric self-worship. Hashem's offering is mandated by the Torah, a Divinely ordained workshop of becoming a better human being. It is an exercise in getting in touch with one's own soul on a deep level.

First, we need to differentiate between sacrifice and offering. The Hebrew word *korbanot* (קֶרְבָּנוֹת) means "be near"; other words from the root include *qarov* "close" and *qerovim* "relatives." It means 'to draw close' or "to become engaged in a close relationship.' The Septuagint generally translates *korbanot* as sacrifice. And this is where the problem lies. To call a korban a sacrifice disfigures and twist what the Torah is aiming at and the goal it has in mind for man. The word "sacrifice" means giving something up, thus being deprived. As we can see, a korban has nothing to do with sacrifice. What we have to understand is that bringing an offering on the altar in the Holy Temple brings a man closer to Hashem.

Another key to understanding these Temple offerings is that throughout the entire book of Vayikra, the only name of Hashem that's mentioned in relation to the offerings, is the name of Hashem, YHVH, the name that stands for the Divine attributes of *chesed* (mercy and kindness). The appellation Elokim, which represents the Divine attribute of *din* (harsh justice) does not appear anywhere in the book of Vayikra. The foundation of the entire concept of the Temple offerings is Hashem's unconditional love for man, the center of His creation. The *korbanot* are designed to facilitate a kindness to man. Thus, the sages refer to Vayikra as "*Torat Kohanim*," meaning 'the instructions of the Kohanim'. The kohanim are the messengers to transmit Hashem's mercy in the world.

The *korbanot* allow the life force of the animals to be elevated through aiding man. The offerings are not needed by Hashem. We are not pleasing Him, or appeasing Him, or paying Him off by bringing in an offering. We bring the offerings to Him so we can separate from our animalistic nature by placing a hand on the '*korbanot*'. By doing so, the *korbanot* also elevates all the levels of creation. The bringer of the

korban is fortified with resolve to safeguard Divine image of precious it is to be a human being and what pleases Hashem by refraining from descending into the spiritual darkness of the animal world. It is the service of the *korbanot* that establishes the distinct division between humanity and the animal world. The *avoda* (service) is the constant, relentless job of life strive to be human.

When we were learning, in the book of Exodus, the Torah portions of Terumah, Tetzaveh, and the first part of Ki Tisa, we learned that all the details of the Tabernacle, its furnishing and all its details, and the Priestly garments, were all told personally by Hashem to Moshe during the initial 40 days and nights that Moshe was on Mount Sinai. That those *parshiot* (plural *parashat*) are a special window into that private time that they had together. And then, the same details, were taught by Moshe to all the people in assembly, in parashat Vayakhel, while the Tabernacle was actually created, in real time, in the Torah portion of Pekudei, the last portion in Shemot.

So why is it that Hashem gave Moshe the commandment of the Tabernacle and all its details on Mount Sinai, but as to what is to be done there, all the commandments of the Temple service and its details, the book of Vayikra, how come these He gave over to Moshe down here, in the Tent of Meeting? Hashem gave Moshe the *korbanot* down here because they are so much rooted in this world. They represent the very purpose of creation: to elevate all of existence. It is to elevate physical reality to spiritual.

The Zohar calls the letters on the parchment, ‘black fire on white fire.’ The writing of a Torah scroll is exact, painstakingly precise and follows an unbroken tradition of thousands of years. And although the writing is consistent, there is a tradition, that you can see sometimes, in a *sefer* Torah, a Torah scroll, that occasionally a letter is to be written differently that it stands out. It is an ancient tradition that was passed down by the sages.

There are lessons to be learned here. For example, the letters are of a uniform size, but occasionally a letter is written larger, or smaller, than the others. Every instance of this in the Torah has great meaning and significance and is explained by the sages. The first letter of the Torah, the ‘beit’ (ב) of the word ‘beresheet,’ (in the beginning,) is written with a very large ‘beit.’ So here, the first word of our *parasha*, is Vayikra (וַיִּקְרָא) “And He called.” But here the last letter of the word is written with a small *aleph*.

The sages taught that small aleph represents Moshe’s unparalleled humility. As Hashem Himself testifies in the book of Bemidbar (Numbers) 12:3, “And the man Moshe was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.” The aleph represents the ‘*ani*’ – the I, the me. Moshe had no self. We learned in parashat Ki Tisa that he said, (Ex. 32:32), if not for Yisrael, ‘erase my name from Your book that You have written.’ Moshe, in Shemot (Exodus) 16:7 dropped the *aleph*, and wouldn’t even pronounce it in Shemot (Exodus) 16:7 when he said concerning himself and Aaron ‘v’nachnu ma (וְנַחֲנוּ מָה) – ‘for what are we, that you should complain against us?’ The correct word for ‘we’ is *anachnu*, we, but Moshe did not even pronounce the *aleph*.

So too the opening word of our *parasha* with its noticeably tiny *aleph*. It is a sign that tells us in order to understand what is being said...what was heard only by Moshe...we will need to approach this with the humility of Moshe. No ego, or prejudices, and personal agendas. This is what Hashem wants for us, and just as with the construction of the tabernacle, we need to make room for Him in this world, so with understanding the *korbanot*, we need to make some room for Him despite what we may think we know. What we think we know can prevent us from understanding the truth. It teaches us to drop the *aleph* (not our own voice) and hear the voice of Hashem calling you by being humble (Vayikra, וַיִּקְרָא).

There is a tradition amongst the House of Yahudah, and that is to teach the Book of Vayikra rather than starting from the Book of Beresheet. The sages explain that Vayikra deals a lot with purity, the laws of purity that are in effect in the time of the Temple. To understand and appreciate the service of the *korbanot*, requires a purity of heart, devoid of agenda. Thus, the sages declare regarding the children's study of Vayikra, 'let the pure come and study about purity.' Before children join the jaded world of the adults, before they become initiated into the society of disbelief and mockery, while they are still of pure heart – perhaps they can hear Hashem's still small voice. They have no *aleph*, no ego yet.

There is a fundamental difference between the Scriptural view and the heathen view of man's relationship with Hashem. The pagan mode of worship seeks to show homage and win grace, and express man's dependence on his deity which he himself has created. But man cannot make gods (for lack of terms) for himself, and by representing god in a corporeal form he has not brought god closer to himself, he has degraded the very idea of the reality of Hashem.

However, by teaching himself to become a spiritual and moral being and by striving to live according to the will of Hashem, he brings himself closer to Elohim, in every aspect of his life. That is the goal of a life based on Torah. And this is the purpose of the Temple offerings. Every person is affected by the feeling of vulnerability that is part of being a human. Everyone wants to be assured of Hashem's protection and guidance. But our challenge and task as humans is not to have influence over Hashem, nor to try to manipulate Divine forces to bend Hashem's will to do our bidding. Our goal in bringing an offering to Hashem is for man to learn himself, not to control not Hashem. You cannot trick Him or buy Him off. Our focus should be what our deeds will be like, or what kind of person we are becoming. This is the core experience of the brining the *korbanot*.

This week, this Shabbat of the Torah reading of Vayikra is also one of the '*arba parshiot*,' the four special Sabbaths that precede Pesach. The marking of these four special Sabbaths is an ancient practice instituted by the sages. Each features a special *maftir*, and additional Torah reading read from a second Torah scroll. This Shabbat, the Sabbath before Purim is known as Parashat Zachor...The 'Sabbath of Remembering', and the additional Torah reading is from Deut. 25:17-19. These verses deal with the obligation to remember the war with Amalek, when they attacked the children of Israel just a short time after they exited from Mitzrayim (Egypt). Yisrael is perpetually commanded to wipe out, to utterly destroy, the memory of Amalek.

The reason for the timing of this special Shabbat's Torah reading is its proximity to the upcoming holiday of Purim. Haman was an Amalekite, a direct descendant of the Amalekite king Agag. But the fact is, the spirit of Amalek is a representative of the dark side of humanity that descended into the abyss of baseless hatred, wanton cruelty, savage destruction of everything good and deconstruction of the Divine image in which humanity was created and is instructed to strive for. Amalek hates human refinement and does everything in its power to destroy the goodness of man as we can see a contrast between this week's Torah reading and *maftir* reading.

The challenge is ours, to rise to the Divine calling of becoming a human being, the message of Vayikra, -- to hear the Divine call. May we merit to the blessings of renewal and redemption, and to the blessings of the ennoblement of the human spirit and getting closer to Hashem, all the holy Torah's messages that will be resonating for us this Shabbat.