

## **Torah portion Vayikra from the book of Leviticus 1:1-5:26**

This week's portion begins the book of Leviticus and is called Vayikra (meaning "And God called") from the book of Leviticus 1:1-5:26. It starts out saying in Leviticus 1:2: *"Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, If any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of the cattle, of the herd, and of the flock."*

It goes on to describe in great detail the five different kinds of sacrifices to be offered in the sanctuary. They are:

1. The olah or burnt offering;
2. The minchah, or meal offering;
3. The zevach shelamim, or "sacrifice of well-being";
4. The chatat, or "sin offering"; and
5. The asham or "guilt offering."

It is hard for us in modern days to comprehend how, at one point in history, Judaism was built around offering cattle, sheep, goats, and birds on the altar as a gift to God. In the Orthodox prayerbook, during the Musaf service, Jews still pray for the rebuilding of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and the reestablishment of these sacrifices. However, the Conservative movement has made a minor liturgical change with major theological ramifications. The Conservative prayerbook speaks of the Temple where "our ancestors used to bring these sacrifices." Reform Judaism does not feel as if we need to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem nor start animal sacrifices again! We believe that God is everywhere, and that wherever we build our Temples all over the world, God will dwell with us there. Indeed God is with us wherever we go.

We must remember that the sacrifices were seen as a way of “pleasing God”. They served a very practical purpose, as well. The Israelites were given equal parcels of land to either work with as farmers growing crops, or tending their cows, goats and sheep. In this way, they were able to sustain themselves. However, the Priests’ and the Levites’ jobs were to prepare the sacrifices and tend to the tabernacle. Their payment was to be able to eat what was left of the sacrifices. Therefore, this was what sustained them in order to live.

We obviously no longer desire a Judaism based on animal sacrifice. Our ethics and our understanding of what God wants from us has evolved.

Our tradition and texts, such as in Leviticus Rabbah 2:12, tells us that going out and doing ugly and immoral things, and then bringing a sacrifice on the altar, does not mean that God will forgive you. We also learn in Eliyahu Rabbah that: “a person should do good deeds, study Torah, and bring an offering. Then God will have mercy and extend repentance.”

Even the great Maimonides, teacher of the law, admitted that animal sacrifice was a compromise based on the reality of how people lived in ancient times. Animal and often human sacrifice were the norm. Perhaps that is why the Akedah is part of the Torah. In a time when human sacrifice was happening, this story about the binding of Isaac proved to our people that God did NOT want human sacrifices. When God gave the Torah, it was given to a people who expected cultic sacrifices. The Torah put a severe limit on which sacrifices should be carried out and only by trained professionals. Maimonides admitted that humanity had evolved, and sacrifice was no longer necessary in his day and age.

It is not simply animal sacrifice where our ethics have evolved. The Torah permits slavery, allows capital punishment for crimes ranging from witchcraft to profaning the Sabbath, and permitted the stoning of a stubborn and rebellious son. Women were clearly given second class status. Rabbinic law would constantly reinterpret these laws as their ethical understanding evolved. So we know that human ethics are constantly evolving. And this has great relevance for our day and age.

It is common today to judge people in the past by contemporary ethical standards. Thomas Jefferson, one of the great leaders of the American revolution, owned slaves. Stephen Foster composed his song "Swanee River" ("Old Folks at Home") using racist lyrics. The lyrics were rewritten when it became the state song of Florida. The Washington D.C. football team had a mascot that Native-Americans found degrading. The team dropped the mascot this past year. And the talented Dr. Seuss wrote some books with stereotypes of different ethnic groups. We don't hear it much today, but Jews were often referred to as Kikes-a derogatory name for Jews. I remember hearing it when I was younger.

There are unethical behaviors that I have seen evolve in my own lifetime. I remember people using the word schwartze for people of color. Most of us would never say it today. Gay marriage was a Shanda when I was growing up and people thought they were just weird. Today, many of us have family members or friends who are African Americans or people from the LGBTQ community and they are loved and supported for who they are, not the color of their skin or sexual preference. We have learned and grown a lot since my childhood, and ethical sensitivities and standards have evolved since those days. We still have a way to go, but it is

slowly changing and getting better. There is definitely room for improvement in the process of seeing the divine in every human being. We need to appreciate how far we have come in our ethical understanding from earlier generations, and then consider how we can do even better. At the heart of this challenge is the understanding that ethics evolve.”

One thing I loved hearing in this portion was that sacrifices were made according to their financial abilities. If they were wealthy, they could bring a whole cow or ox. The middle class would bring a goat or ram. The lower income families could bring a lamb or even a mere dove. And those with the least resources could bring the same offering but using *flour*. It wasn't the thing you brought that mattered, it was that you were making a sacrifice by bringing it.

The only difference in the text between the instructions for the offering of the richer and the poor person was how the Torah referred to the one presenting the sacrifice.

Leviticus 2:1 tells us: “v'nefesh ki takriv korban minchah L'Adonai “When a **soul** presents a meal (flour) offering to Adonai”

However, when a wealthy person makes a sacrifice, even if it is a cow, they are merely called Adam or a **person**.

The commentators on this parasha/portion, interpret this to mean that the destitute person who makes his simple sacrifice, is a “*Nefesh*” – **Soul!** They deem that this title of “soul” is a much hoier title than person.

Because when you think of it, it is easy for a wealthy man to offer a whole cow because he still has lamb or goat at home to eat. When the middle-class person sacrifices a lamb, he

goes home and still has fowl for dinner. The lower income person comes home after offering his dove in the tabernacle but still comes home to bread on the table.

However, when the poorest person sacrifices his *flour* in the Sanctuary, he may not have a meal waiting for him upon his return. That is all he has.

That is why his sacrifice is the holiest. It comes from a person's very soul. He is not thinking about what this sacrifice will do for him, he is thinking of making a sacrifice to God from his heart and very soul.

This is a lesson to teach us that it's not a person's wealth that should impress us, rather a person's spirituality and compassion, and willingness to give to others.

Perhaps you've seen the youtube video of the homeless man who was given a \$100, who then went and bought food and shared it with every homeless person in the nearby park..

The man, Thomas explained that he quit his job to take care of his sick parents, only to lose his home after his parents died within two weeks of each other. That is why he was living on the streets. When asked why he was giving everything to others, he said: "There are things money can't buy and I get happiness out of what I'm doing,"

Now that man was a "nefesh"! A true neshama or mensch!

As Passover approaches soon, we read in the haggadah that we are also challenged to open our hearts, our pocketbooks and our homes to the needy and isolated.

Although we may be alone for our seders again this year, it doesn't mean we have to be lonely.

In modern days, we no longer make sacrifices, nor do we pretend we ever want to make animal sacrifices in the future. We understand that the sacrifices that God wants from us today is to be good and righteous, to help others in any way we can, to follow the ethical laws and morals that the Torah teaches us, and to make donations of any kind that we can afford either of money or of our time in helping others and volunteering. This will truly elevate us to not just being 'Adam'-a person, but to assuredly be in G-d's eyes holy souls-Nefashot! Amen!