



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

ויקרא תש"ף
Vayikra 5780

The Prophetic View of Sacrifice

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

To love and honour God is to love and honour our fellow humans.



PARSHAT VAYIKRA IN A NUTSHELL

Vayikra is the third book of the Torah. This one is quite different. Unlike the other books, Vayikra does not really tell a story or describe a journey like the other books of the Torah. It takes place only at Mount Sinai. The entire book takes place over just one month! There is almost no tale being told at all, but there are a lot of mitzvot.

Vayikra is placed at the centre of the Chumash, and it contains the key to understanding Israel's mission in the world – to be “a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.” This is the first time in history a group of people have ever been given a collective mission, and every time we read the Book of Vayikra, we are reminded of this mission.

The parsha of Vayikra describes the various kinds of sacrifices the Israelites brought to the Mishkan. There were five: the burnt offering (*ola*), the grain offering (*mincha*), the peace offering (*shelamim*), the sin offering (*chatat*), and the guilt offering (*asham*).

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think we gave sacrifices to God in the Mishkan and later in the Beit Hamikdash? Does God need them?



THE CORE IDEA

Sacrifices were very important in the religious life of biblical Israel. This is seen by how much space in the Torah is given to talking about them. But the later Prophets, during the time of the first Temple, seemed to be quite critical of sacrifices. For example, the Prophet Samuel gave one of the first speeches warning of the religious dangers of sacrifices: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the Lord’s command? Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice, compliance than the fat of rams”. (1 Samuel 15:22)

Amos said in the name of God: “If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your meal offerings—I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings ... But let justice well up like water, righteousness like a never-ending stream” (Amos 5:21-24). Hosea had a similar message: “For I desire goodness, not sacrifice; obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

Jeremiah seems to suggest that the sacrificial order was not God’s initial intention: “For when I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice. But this is what I commanded them: Do My bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you” (Jeremiah 7:22-23).

The strongest of all the messages against sacrifices is the passage found at the beginning of the book of Isaiah that we read on Shabbat Chazon (before Tisha b’Av): “What need have I of all your sacrifices?” says the Lord. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of My courts? Stop bringing

meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me” (Isaiah 1:11-13).

This passage is quite extraordinary. The people are being criticised not for disobeying God’s law but for obeying it. Sacrifices were commanded. Their offering was a sacred act performed in a holy place. What made these Prophets so angry?

It was not that they were against sacrifices as such. Jeremiah foresaw the day when “People shall come from the towns of Judah and from the surroundings [to Jerusalem] ... bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, meal offerings and frankincense, and bringing offerings of thanksgiving to the House of the Lord” (Jeremiah 17:26).

Isaiah also saw sacrifices as part of the worship of Hashem in a future Messianic time: “I will bring them to My sacred mount and let them rejoice in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices shall be welcome on My altar,

for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7).

They were not criticising the institution of sacrifices. They were criticising something else, something that still exists today.

What distressed them so deeply was the idea that you could serve God and at the same time act disrespectfully, cruelly, unjustly, insensitively or heartlessly toward other people. It was the attitude that “So long as I am in God’s good graces, that is all that matters.” that made the Prophets burn with anger. If you think this, they seem to be telling us, then you haven’t understood either God or Torah.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How do you think people who keep the laws carefully but are not nice to others justify their behaviour?
2. Have you ever experienced this kind of behaviour?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Aaron Feuerstein owned a textile mill in a small town called Lawrence in Massachusetts, at a time when most of the textile mills had closed down because it was cheaper to have fabrics imported from other countries such as India and Mexico. Then the mill suffered a devastating fire, and most people assumed Aaron, by then 70 years old, would take this opportunity to take the insurance money and close the mill down. But the business was a major employer in the local town, providing employment for 1,800 people. These people would all lose their jobs and their families would struggle if the mill closed. Aaron felt a responsibility towards them and refused to close the mill. Not only did he rebuild the mill, ensuring their jobs would be safe, but he also paid them full salaries while the mill was being rebuilt and they couldn’t work.

When asked why he made this decision, he answered that as a religious Jew, he was following the rule that: “You are not permitted to oppress the working man because he’s poor and needy amongst your brethren and amongst the non-Jews in your community” However, he went far beyond what the halacha required of him (and in fact this decision led to business difficulties for this textile mill) and in so doing he made a tremendous Kiddush Hashem (sanctifying God’s name). Aaron from then on became known as “the mensch of Malden Mills”.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How did Aaron Feuerstein make a Kiddush Hashem?
2. Does this story show that he understood the message of the Prophets during the First Temple period?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The first thing the Torah tells us about humanity is that we are each in the image and likeness of God Himself. Therefore if you wrong a human being, you are abusing the only creation in the universe on which God has set His image. A sin against any person is a sin against God.

In the first mission statement of the Jewish people, God said about Avraham, “For I have chosen him that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right” (Bereishit 18:19). The way of the Lord is to act justly and righteously toward your fellow human beings. In context, this meant that God was inviting Avraham to

pray on behalf of the people of Sodom, even though he knew that they were wicked and sinners.

It is specifically in the book of sacrifices, Vayikra, that we find the twin commands to love your neighbour as yourself, and to also love the stranger (Vayikra 19:18, 33-34). The sacrifices that express our love and awe of God should lead to love of the neighbour and the stranger. There should be a seamless transition from commands between us and God to commands between us and our fellow humans.

Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah all witnessed societies in which people were punctilious in bringing their offerings to the Temple, but in which there was bribery,

corruption, perversion of justice, abuse of power and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. The Prophets saw in this a profound and dangerous contradiction.

The very act of bringing a sacrifice was fraught with ambiguity. Jews were not the only people in ancient times to have Temples, Priests and sacrifices. Almost everyone did. It was precisely here that the religion of ancient Israel came closest, outwardly, to the practices of their pagan neighbours. But the sacrificial systems of other cultures were based on totally different beliefs. In many religions, sacrifices were seen as a way of placating or appeasing the gods. The Aztecs believed that sacrificial offerings fed the gods who sustained the universe. Walter Burkert speculated that the ancient Greeks experienced guilt when they killed animals for food, so they offered sacrifices as a way of appeasing their consciences.

All these ideas are alien to Judaism. God cannot be bribed or appeased. Nor can we bring Him anything that is not His. God sustains the universe: the universe does not sustain Him. And wrongs righted by sacrifice do not excuse other wrongs. So intention and mindset were essential in the sacrificial system. The thought that "If I bring a sacrifice to God, He will overlook my other faults" – in effect, the idea that I can bribe the Judge of all the earth – turns a sacred act into a pagan one, and produces precisely the opposite result than the one intended by the Torah. It turns religious worship from a way towards the right and the good, into a way of easing the conscience of those who practice the wrong and the bad.

To serve God is to serve humanity. That was the point made memorably by Micah: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: To do justice, to love

goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6-8). Jeremiah said of King Josiah: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know Me? says the Lord" (Jeremiah 22:16). Knowing God, said Jeremiah, means caring for those in need.

Rambam said essentially the same at the end of *The Guide for the Perplexed* (III, 54). He quotes Jeremiah: "Only in this should one glory: that they have the understanding to know Me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23). To know God is to know what it is to act with kindness, justice and righteousness.

The danger of the sacrificial system, said the Prophets, is that it can lead people to believe that there are two domains, the Temple and the world, serving God and caring for one's fellow humans, and that these are disconnected. Judaism rejects the concept of two disconnected domains. Halachically they are distinct, but psychologically, ethically and spiritually they are part of a single indivisible system.

I believe that to love God is to love our fellow humans. To honour God is to honour our fellow humans. We may not ask God to listen to us if we are unwilling to listen to others. We may not ask God to forgive us if we are unwilling to forgive others. To know God is to seek to imitate Him, which means, said Jeremiah and Rambam, to exercise kindness, justice and righteousness on earth.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

According to these ideas, which laws are more important, those between us and God or those between people?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

"It is precisely in our day-to-day relationships, at work or among friends, in our dealings with people and the integrity, sensitivity and generosity we bring to bear on them, that we most add or subtract to the respect those around us have for the values by which we live. Here, the greatest of biblical commands – to sanctify and not desecrate God's name – have their arena, their impact and influence. There is no greater religious achievement than to have sanctified God's name, and no greater a sin than to have lessened the respect in which it is held... 'Sanctifying the name' is no mere marginal addendum to the script of Jewish life but its very point: to bring God's presence into the world by making others aware that God's word sanctifies life."

To Heal a Fractured World, p.68



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the rationale behind sacrificial worship of God?
2. What are the dangers of this form of worship (as highlighted by the Prophets)?
3. What should the focus of our worship of God be (according to this week's *Covenant & Conversation*)?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. God does not need our sacrifices. He does not need anything. The sacrifices are for us not for Him. They are a way for us to show that we are willing to give Him everything we have. Sacrifices are a way for us to feel close to Him (the root of the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *k-r-v* which means close). When we give a gift to a friend this brings us closer to them, so too with sacrifices.

THE CORE IDEA

1. There is the law (halacha) and then there is spirit of the law. One can be 100% committed to keeping all the details of the Torah, but forget about the spirit of the law – the core values that the laws try and uphold. Sometimes one can lose sight of the larger picture when one becomes passionate and zealous in one's service of God. The Prophets warned against this very phenomenon.
2. Sadly there are often high profile example of deeply religious people who fall in this way and fail to see the godliness in all human beings and then mistreat them. Examples exist in our everyday lives also. All humans are imperfect and fallible, and it is our challenge to listen to the message of the Prophets and the Torah and not make the same mistakes.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. He was not required or even expected to rebuild the mill and ensure job security for his 1,800 employees. He went beyond the letter of the law in order to protect these people for whom he felt responsible. This caused people to think positively about him, Jews in general and God (for this is the behaviour of a religious Jew who keeps the Torah). This is called sanctifying God's name.
2. While the halacha (and civil law) did not require him to go to these lengths, he did so because he clearly understood the message of the Prophets: To serve God is to serve humanity. Knowing God means caring for those in need. To love and honour God is to love and honour our fellow humans.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. We are reluctant to answer this question and to elevate one type of mitzvah above another. However, the message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* is that loving and honouring our fellow humans is in fact loving and honouring God. Mitzvot between person to person have an added dimension of being a service of God as well.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Sacrifices were the language of religious worship in biblical times. Humans at that time would have found it difficult to approach and connect to God in any other way. Sacrifices are a way for humans to connect and draw close to God. The root of the Hebrew word for sacrifice is *k-r-v* which means close. Just as when we give a gift to a friend this brings us closer to them, giving God something we own brings us closer to Him.
2. The danger to be wary of, is that we may focus only on our relationship with God, and accidentally neglect our moral behaviour towards other human beings. God cannot be bribed or appeased by sacrifices, and wrongs righted by sacrifice do not excuse other wrongs. Religious worship must not be a way of easing the conscience of those who behave in an immoral way in their everyday activities. The Prophets said that the danger of the sacrificial system is that it can lead people to think that "there are two domains, the Temple and the world, serving God and caring for one's fellow humans, and they are disconnected. Judaism rejects the concept of two disconnected domains. Halachically they are distinct, but psychologically, ethically and spiritually they are part of a single indivisible system."
3. "To serve God is to serve humanity". That was the point made memorably by Micah: "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: To do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:6-8). Jeremiah said of King Josiah: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know Me? says the Lord" (Jer. 22:16). Knowing God, said Jeremiah, means caring for those in need.