

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

VAYIKRA

TZAV

SHEMINI

TAZRIA

METZORA

ACHREI MOT

KEDOSHIM

EMOR

BEHAR

BECHUKOTAI

VAYIKRA

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POWER OF PURPOSE

When assessing the value of goods, most people measure the physical quality of the product or the quantity of time, energy and resources invested in its creation. How though, does God measure the value of good deeds? Does He analyse how much money we spend, how many resources we invest, or how much energy we exert? Or does the Divine system work differently?

This week we reopen the Book of Leviticus and discuss the many individual sacrifices that were required in Temple times. They range from the more expensive cattle offerings¹ through to the cheaper meal offerings.² The refrain: ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance to God’ occurs eight times in the Book of Leviticus, always in relation to the sacrifices.³ What is the function of this phrase, and why is it repeatedly emphasised?

The scope of the different sacrifices required in the Temple allows for people of differing financial abilities to give according to their means. The mishna states:

It is stated with regard to an offering from an animal, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’, and with regard to an offering from fowl, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’ and with regard to the meal offering, ‘a fire offering, a pleasant fragrance’ to teach that: [It is not important] whether one does a lot or a little, as long as one directs one’s intention towards Heaven.⁴

Rashi highlights the fact that the word ‘soul’ is used only with regard to the meal offering, the cheapest of the range of sacrifices, in order to emphasise the fact that for a poor person, it may be a tremendous financial struggle to bring this sacrifice, and God thus sees it as if he has offered his soul.⁵

God’s yardstick seems clear: Each person is simply required to give as much as he can, so long as his intentions are pure and directed towards Heaven.

This principle can be extrapolated beyond the financial arena, and beyond the sacrificial realm, to all areas of life. Some people lack the requisite knowledge to keep every commandment or do every good deed, but that does not preclude them from trying and directing their thoughts and intentions towards God. Other people may have the ability to pray with devout intention when they feel inspired, yet at other times they feel emotionally void or spiritually uninspired. They too are not precluded from continually making an honest effort, regardless of their current level of inspiration. The common denominator is that regardless of one’s ability, or one’s means, one is constantly required to try and direct one’s intentions towards Heaven.



As it says in one of the most famous liturgical poems during the lead-up to the High Holy Days, ‘Master of forgiveness, examiner of hearts’,⁶ which reflects God’s ability to see into every hidden thought while at the same time granting merciful forgiveness. In contrast to physical goods, God measures good deeds not by one’s abilities but rather by one’s intentions, the desires of one’s heart and the extent of one’s efforts.

Regardless of what we have, the Jewish system declares: ‘Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.’⁷

The word *korban*, or ‘sacrifice’, is derived from the same root as *karov*, meaning ‘come close’.

The word *lehakriv*, or ‘to bring a sacrifice’, can therefore also be read as ‘to bring closeness’.

In honour of a speedy and complete recovery for our precious daughter

Lital Gila bat Renana Yael

מוקדש לרפואתה השלמה
והמהירה של ביתינו היקרה
ליטל גילה בת רננה יעל

In order to build a close relationship with God, we are required to give of ourselves and to entirely dedicate our thoughts to Him, for according to God’s gauge, the beauty and value of one’s deeds ultimately lies in the intentions, not in the end product.

Notes

¹ *Leviticus* 1:3-9.

² *Leviticus* 2:1-16.

³ *Leviticus* 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9; 3:5; 23:13, 18.

⁴ Mishna, Tractate *Menachot* 13:11.

⁵ Rashi on *Leviticus* 2:1, based on Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Menachot* 104b.

⁶ *Adon HaSelichot* in *Siddur of Rav Amram Gaon*, p.155.

⁷ Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 2:12.

Parasha Fact:

We always have salt on the table during Shabbat, just like sacrifices had salt, to remind us that our tables are as holy as the altar.

Next week in Tzav:

Among families, mundane chores are often, quite organically, divided up between the members of the household, so that there is usually one person whose job it is, for example, to take out the trash. Have you ever wondered, however, about the mundane tasks that needed taking care of in the Temple? Who cleared the dishes? Who took out the trash? Fascinating insights into the routines of priestly life teach important life lessons on sanctifying the mundane, preserving humility and appreciating the Divine gift of each new day.

שבת שלום