Vayikra

The last chapters of the book of Exodus were concerned with the creation of the mishkan, the Sanctuary, a labor of love that was undertaken in order that G-d might draw near, and dwell among us. By the end of Exodus, the Tabernacle was built, but could not be approached, not even by Moses. *"Moses was not able to enter into the Tent of Meeting, for the cloud did rest upon it and the glory of HaShem filled the Tabernacle."* The Divine Presence presented a kind of barrier, seeming to prevent the very kind of intimacy with the Divine that the Tent of Meeting was supposed to provide.

Our portion initiates this intimacy, with the call of God to Moses. "*Vayikra el Moshe vai'daber HaShem eilaiv me'ohel" "and (G-d) called to Moses and HaShem spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting."* G-d, as it were, takes the first step and provides an opening – an invitation – to approach Her.

The commentators make much of the fact that the first word in Leviticus, *Vayikra,* is written with the last letter of the word, the *aleph*, appearing much smaller than the rest of the word. Many feel that this miniaturized letter was an allusion to the humility of Moses, who felt unworthy of direct contact with

the divine. Others see in this small aleph an allusion to the *tzimtzum*, G-d's contraction of the infinite into the finite, in order to make the divine accessible to mortal beings. The Tabernacle itself was intended to represent this *tzimtzum*, this contraction.

Actually, I think that these two interpretations of the small aleph are complementary. The miniature letter alludes to both the divine and human, whose names begin with aleph: *adonai* and *adam.* The humility of Moses was his own form of *tzimtzum*, matching that of G-d. Just as G-d reduced his overwhelming Presence to become accessible to the human, so Moses reduced his human ego to become open to the divine. The small *Aleph* remained as a clue to that which makes God accessible: We must reduce our own sense of self importance to make room for that which makes our self truly important. Otherwise the ego creates an impenetrable cloud, concealing the divine. Only when we can see that our true self worth lies in our ability to align our will with that of our creator, will the cloud lift and the Infinite will call out, inviting us to intimacy.

You might say that this ego reduction, this tzimtzum, is the

whole purpose of the sacrificial system, with which the book of Leviticus is primarily concerned. The basic principle behind the *korban*, "sacrifice," is rooted in the word *karov,* meaning "to come close, to be intimate." The *korban* represents the possibility for us to heal our damaged relationship with God, to come close, to re-connect with what the ego has distanced.

Of course, exactly how this closeness was achieved by slaughtering a bunch of animals and slinging their blood around is a bit obscure to modern sensibilities. We regard such practices as barbaric and primitive. After all, for us the slaughter of livestock is carefully hidden from view. Our connection with our food and its origins is dissolved in chemical additives and saran-wrapped on supermarket shelves. We deplete the water table, destroy the rainforests, and squander vast amounts of land to the livestock industry in order to maintain a diet that disconnects us from any awareness of where our food comes or how it is prepared, takes us out of the cyclic rhythms of life and death, of ecological harmony.

So perhaps before we pass judgment on the barbaric rites of

sacrifice, we might first ask who are the real barbarians here. The people who invested their lives and energy in close connection with their source of sustenance, whose deep involvement with the elemental processes of life and death was celebrated with sacrifice at the altar? These are the barbarians? Or might they be those who worship at the altar of greed and indulgence while carefully concealing from view the effect our own 'sacrifices' have on the very source of life itself.

But that's not what I came to talk about. No one wants to see a return to the sacrificial system; the idea is to discover the inner significance of the sacrifices, the statement they made about the relationship between humanity and God, and see what modern methods are available by which we can recover that significance and reestablish that relationship.

One such insight was provided by R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who noticed a grammatical oddity about the second line of this week's sedra: "*adam ki-yakriv mikem korban laHaShem min habehemah…"* '..when one of you offers a sacrifice to HaShem from the animals...' (Lev. 1:2)

Now according to the normal rules of grammar we would expect to read: *adam mikem ki yakriv*, "when one of you offers a sacrifice". Instead what it says is *adam ki yakriv mikem*, "when one offers a sacrifice *of you*". The essence of sacrifice, said R. Schneur Zalman, is that we offer ourselves. We bring to God our physical energies, our emotions, and our thoughts. The physical sacrifice - an animal offered on the altar - is only an external expression of an inner act. The real sacrifice is *mikem*, "of you". We give God something of ourselves.

The verse uses three words for the animals to be sacrificed: *behemah* (animal), *bakar* (cattle) and *tzon* (flock). Some suggest that each represents an animal-like feature of the human personality that needs to be sacrificed before divine intimacy can be reestablished.

I prefer to see each type of animal as alluding to three dimensions of the soul that need to be brought into alignment with the divine:

Behemah, animal, is derived from *behem*, to brutalize; it refers to the *nefesh*, the instinctual soul that animates the

physicality of existence, such as our heartbeat and breath. The *nefesh* also controls such reptilian-brain functions like fight or flight, eat or be eaten: the tools of survival.

Tzon, flock of sheep or goats, is thought by some to be derived from *yatzah,* 'to go out', as a flock goes out to pasture. This reflects *ruach*, the emotional soul, the feelings level with which we receive input from the outside world. This feelings level is what constitutes our actual world. What we call 'reality' is not the world as it truly is, but rather it is our *response* to the world. Reality is how we process external stimuli, it is not the source of the stimuli itself. That's why witnesses to a traffic accident, for example, will produce multiple versions of the reality of what happened, and each version will be equally 'true'.

When you think about it, our feelings are not only our only reality, they are the only reality over which we exert any control. How we react to a situation determines the nature of the situation. The world itself is neutral; how we choose to respond to it determines whether it is good or bad, loving or threatening, easy or difficult. Our emotional life *is* our life, and to the extent we can control our feelings and emotions

will determine the reality of our lives. To become fully human we must learn to let our soul direct our emotional life – keep our feelings in pasture, so to speak, as a shepherd guards a flock, lest our emotional life becomes enslaved to whatever caprice the world delivers, and our lives are scattered amidst a confusion of unthinking reactions and ego-based desires.

Bakar, the word for cattle, can also mean to examine, distinguish, critique. It alludes to *neshamah*, that intellectual faculty with which we organize our world.

So our task is to detach our physical, emotional, and intellectual faculties from service to the ego and align them with our divine potential. Only then can we can reclaim our true self worth as images of G-d. Only then can we respond when G-d calls out to us.

It is worth noting that the numerical values for the words *behemah, tzon, and bakar*, add up to 495, the value of the word *temimah*, which means pure, unblemished. What we wish to offer to HaShem is all of our human faculties unblemished by sin or ego worship. This may be one reason

why so many of the animals offered on the altar needed to be *tamim:* unblemished, pure.

It was pretty easy to do with the sacrifice; you just burnt it up, or separated out the bad stuff and buried it out back, sent the rest up in smoke or fed it to the priests. But what means have we today that can accomplish the same objective?

We are taught that the world rests on three things: Torah, avodah, and gemillut chassidim. We might expand those terms today to include mindfulness, meditation, and service to others. Each in their way corresponds to the three soul dimensions once represented by the different animals used as a korban.

Remember that the word signifying sacrifice, *korban,* means to draw near, be intimate. Intimacy occurs on physical, emotional, and conscious levels, but in order to be truly intimate, we must cultivate a mindfulness of the other that accepts them for who they truly are, not as we want them to be. To be able to relate to someone as a means of connection rather than as an object of manipulation requires us to direct our mental faculties, our neshamah, in so

conscious a fashion as to enlarge one's sense of self to include another.

As Prof. David Patterson notes*, another cognate of *korban* is the noun *kerev*, which denotes a deep inwardness, as in the phrase *mikerev-lev*, 'from the depths of the heart.'. It alludes to our ability to rise above the storm of our emotions and become centered in our divine self. In such meditation, we don't repress our *ruach,* our feelings, we remain fully aware of our emotions – but we are not controlled by them. The flock stays in pasture.

Yet another cognate of korban is *karov*, which can refer to a kinsman, a close blood relative. When we are able to consciously and emotionally reduce our ego-driven self and accept another as part of ourselves, as a blood relative, we can overcome the fight or flight, survival based instinctual life of the nefesh. An act as simple as offering ones food to another, thus placing the sustenance of another's life before your own, can symbolize this transcendence of the animal self.

Perhaps this is why our tradition teaches that the ancient sacrificial altar has been replaced by the table on which we serve bread to our friends and family. Perhaps it's why an *eruv*, a realm of communal Sabbath observance, is created by handing off one's bread to a neighbor, who in turn gives it to another, like we do during our oneg after hamotzi. When each offers bread to another, a community is created in which the holiness of Shabbat can enter the world.

So, maybe a modern day equivalent of the korban is when we employ the three versions of korban – korban, kerev, and karov – mindfulness, meditation, and service to others - to sacrifice our narrow-minded self interest and become ever more conscious of how our actions affect others, and the planet that sustains us all. Maybe when we learn to extend our Sabbath community to embrace the entire world, we will hear G-d calling to us.

*David Patterson, Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought, RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.