

Last week, I spoke about the importance of Leviticus as a spiritual container for us as we move towards the High Holidays. In the first two Torah portions of Leviticus, we received a LOT of details about sacrifices: grain offerings, animal offerings, daily offerings, atonement offerings, gratitude offerings. You name it; there's an offering for it.

But this week, Pasrashat Shmini, three portions into Leviticus, marks the first actual *performance* of an offering. The past weeks have been the instructions; this week's Torah portion is about the inauguration festivities of the Priests, when they actually make the very first offering.

Incidentally, all of this is occurring at the beginning of the first month of the year – which is to say, Nissan, the month we're about to begin.

The first offering is made by Aaron, the High Priest and Moses's brother. And interestingly, his very first offering is not a celebration offering or a daily offering. Aaron is told: "Take for yourself a young calf for a sin offering."

The commentators pick up on this language: why the words, "for yourself?" why a sin offering? And the answer lies in the question. Some may remember that Aaron had a very key role, in our torah portion several weeks ago, in the making of the Golden Calf. When the people got nervous with Moses up on the mountain, and wanted a new god, Aaron is the one who instructed them to bring the gold, who actually fashioned the idol for them. When Moses finds out about this, he breaks that Tablets of the commandments, and a wholesale slaughter ensues, followed by a plague. Aaron says in that Torah portion of a few weeks ago that he was frightened, that he did it to try to keep the people organized and unified, and he survives.

But this is not a little mistake. Even today, traditional prayer books list 6 events that Jews should meditate on every day, good and bad, at the end of the morning service. Along with the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the episode of the Golden Calf is one of those six things that should be remembered daily, as a moral lesson. It's considered the moral low point of the people Israel in the whole Torah. And of course, for Aaron, as well, who enabled and orchestrated it all.

And yet, despite the sense of the calamity that surrounds the episode of the golden calf, Aaron survived it to become high priest. And he is commanded to take for himself a calf as a sin offering, as the very first sacrificial act in the Temple.

Rashi, a medieval French commentator, says that this sin offering is an offering of personal atonement for the Golden calf. Even though Aaron and the rest of the people had already atoned, even though the episode is long past us now, Aaron has to symbolically relive it, but fix it. This time, instead of setting up a golden calf as a God, he offers a calf to God. He offers his biggest mistake, as his very first offering.

There is something profound here. At the moment of Aaron stepping into his greatest power and authority, to be the divine conduit for the whole people. At the moment of the greatest spiritual import, he has to recall the moment when he was most lost, most distant from divinity, when he had strayed the furthest. How very humbling. And how very inspiring, the message: that when we want seek holiness, when we want to connect, we start, not with our greatest strength, not with what we're proud of, not even with our gratitude, but with our most vulnerable shame.

The chatat, the sin offering comes first. And the word חטא, that gets translated as sin, doesn't even mean sin in the sense of willful wrongdoing, but in the sense of missing the mark, such as when an arrow misses its target. It's the word for failing after trying. We try, we fail. And our failure, before our success, is our first offering.

Our every day life is made of up failures. Who among us is ever the perfect person we'd like to be? We sometimes blow off our friends. We sometimes fail to be there for our spouses. We sometimes lose our temper with the very people we want to support. We juggle priorities, and something always gets short shrift, especially in this over-committed day and age. But the sum of being a decent person isn't about never messing up; it's about how we acknowledge and face our failings, address them, learn from them and move forward.

We start by offering the chatat. We start by offering up shame. This is really important. Because what good does shame do, besides hobble us? Beside implant a voice in our heads, telling us we're bad, we're good for nothing, we're insensitive jerks who will never learn. And we can drown in those voices. If you'll excuse a Harry Potter reference, when we hold our shame close, it can create dementors – shadowy creatures that can suck away our purpose and our drive to learn from our mistakes, to reach out, to admit that we could do better and to have the juice go and do what we need to do.

So Leviticus says, start by offering the shame. Give it away. It can't every do you any good, so stop holding it close; give it up to God. If you're willing to take what is most embarrassing and uncomfortable, those things you wished you'd never done, those things that you wish could good forget, take them out, offer them up on the altar and give it to God, it can be turned into a **ריח ניכוח**, a sweet smell, a sweet divine offering. Give that to God, and only then can you get on with the rest of the work.

So in just over three weeks, many of us will sit down to Passover seders. And the text of the seder says, as we begin to tell the story, that we tell it **מי גנות לשבח**, from shame to praise. From degradation to dignity. Whether moving in a personal journey or a communal journey, we can't get to the moment of liberation until we have wrestled with moment of shame, embraced it as part of the story, and offered in on the altar to be transformed into a sweet gift for the divine.

Aaron didn't only survive the episode of the Golden calf. He survived it to become the High Priest. And what had been his deepest mistake became his inaugural offering. So I want to offer us the blessing of Aaron this evening, – I want to bless us all that we can do the spiritual work of Aaron, of digging into ourselves, pulling out our messiness and our shame and our missed opportunities, and offering them up on the altar, so that we can take can take our own rightful place as partners in the divine encounter, and in setting the seder.