

In my rabbinical school days, when students approached the end of their next-to-the-last year, the Great Lottery was held. This lottery determined which *parasha* we would have as our assignment for our senior sermon. After the davening was done on Shabbat morning, all the students and faculty would gather in the Women's League synagogue as the "victim of the week" presented his or her insights and inspirations. The dean was there. The Chancellor was there. It was Bar/Bat Mitzvah all over again, but much, much more stressful.

It was conventional wisdom back then, and I think it still is, that those of us who drew our *parsha* from *Bereshit* or *Shmot* had an easier time of it, because after all, most of the first two books of Torah are narrative. You can have a wonderful time with Cain and Abel, or Pharaoh's hard heart. But what do you do with *Vayikra*? This third book of Torah is, after all, concerned with sacrifices. Dead animals. And more to the point, a system of worship that has been obsolete for 2,000 years.

In fact, anyone can talk about dysfunctional families. It takes a real rabbi to find something relevant in *Vayikra*!

Vayikra, after all, is about more than dead animals and incense. It's about holiness. And the real challenge is to find ways to reinterpret the path to holiness from literal

to symbolic, from the actual bringing of an animal sacrifice to a rethinking of what it might mean to being an animal sacrifice today. Holiness is as much to be desired today as it was 2,000 years ago.

We need a sense of holiness in our lives today as we did in the days of the Holy Temple, and even before then.

So what can we learn from *Vayikra*?

WE MIGHT DEFINE HOLINESS AS AN AWARENESS OF THE PRESENCE OF THE SACRED.

We are in the presence of Something greater than ourselves, more powerful, and profoundly compelling. Rabbi Eli Munk suggests **it is this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves that sets us above other forms of life in our world.** "We stand," he tells us, "in marked contrast to plant life. The latter, rooted in the soil, draws up the life-giving sap it needs from its roots, its lower extremities. As for the animal, its vital center is its heart, a central

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part of the body. Our life, however, is bonded to our spirit... We lift our eyes upward and receive all our strength from above."

Plants are rooted below, animals find their strength within, and humans-if we are perceptive-find our strength from above. When we are aware of the strength that flows from above and

beyond us, we feel the presence of the Holy.

Bringing a gift to God, worshipping God by giving back of the best of our possessions, was a way to feel ourselves in the presence of the Holy two thousand years ago.

How can we feel that sanctity today?

Is there something physical we can do, some action we can take to fine tune, as it were, our spiritual antennae?

I frankly don't think we can do anything today!

I think the time for action is past.

As a people, we have gone beyond the physical to the spiritual, to the sensing of God rather than the feeling of God, like we feel hot or cold. And sensing is far more difficult than feeling.

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How do we begin to sense God's presence?

How do we bring the holy into our lives?

TORAH STUDY IS ONE WAY. Every week, I find one or more commentaries on the opening chapters of Genesis, and in the teaching of them I am able to open a conversation with my students about God.

The other thing about Torah study, beside studying the commentaries, is the literary effort itself. We don't skim the text. We read each verse, closely and carefully. We try to imagine what the words are trying to depict. What was it like? What can our mind's eye conjure for us?

It is impossible to read Torah closely and not be overwhelmed by a verse like God formed Adam from the dust of the earth, blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living being. Understand what Torah is saying. God came close enough to Adam to blow a soul into him. The Zohar teaches us to focus on this verse. One who blows, blows from within himself. Thus the human soul is part of God. Each child, before emitting his first cry in this world, receives a breath of life from God, who blows a soul into its tiny mouth. Perhaps that first cry is our first expression of gratitude and wonder at the gift that God has given us.

If our soul is not just put into us by God but blown into our mouths in a profoundly intimate way, we contain each of us a part of God. Not just a spark of the Divine, which can be struck by a distant

match, but part of God's very essence.

How can we be less than spectacular if we are vessels that contain the breath of God? How can we look at one another in the same way again, knowing that each person we meet was greeted at birth by God in the same way?

The Holy is found not by action but by silence, by meditation, by study. We bring not our animals or our possessions but something far more valuable. We bring ourselves. That is the sacrifice of today.

The English word sacrifice denotes the giving of something valuable for a greater purpose. We might prefer not to give this

particular gift, but our personal feelings have to take a back seat to a greater good. I once asked a Bar Mitzvah boy whose *parsha* was *Vayikra*, "If your friend lost all his baseball cards, perhaps your friends would rebuild his collection by each giving him 3 or 4 cards from your respective collections. Which would you give him? An old, dog-eared card from some unknown shortstop who never made it out of the minor leagues or a mint-condition Sandy Koufax from his rookie year?" My student thought for a few moments and realized which he would prefer to give, but understood that in reality he would give not the unknown player but the Sandy Koufax. That, I said, is a sacrifice. Giving something of yours for a higher purpose.

The Hebrew word for something brought to the worship of God does not denote the diminishment of our possessions. It is a more positive word, ***Korban***, from the root meaning "TO DRAW NEAR." Bringing a sacrifice is about bringing us nearer to God. And what we must bring is ourselves: our silence, our vulnerability, our willingness to listen, to sense God's nearness, to recognize that while we are the crown of life in this world, we are only human. God requires our humility.

If everything we are as humans is a gift from God, God wants an expression of our gratitude by our bringing those gifts back to serving God. Our intellect, our creative talents, our very lives are gifts for which we must be profoundly grateful. Each time we bring these gifts to God, we are expressing our gratitude.

- Each time we give our time back to God – setting aside Shabbat as a sacred time – we are thanking God for the gift of our lives.
- Each time we pause in our week to set time aside for Torah study, we are thanking God for the gift of our intellect.
- Each time we open a *Siddur*, each morning we wrap ourselves in Tallit and Tefillin, we are thanking God for the soul that with regularity seeks its source.

All these efforts – Shabbat, *Talmud Torah* – are sacrifices. We sacrifice something we value and wish to use for our purposes, and we set it aside and use it for God's purposes instead. These *mitzvot* in particular, are opportunities for personal encounters with God.

The *ancient Rabbis* explain that the word *Vayikra* is chosen carefully. God doesn't speak to Moses – we find *VA'YIDABER ADONAI EL MOSHE* all throughout the Torah – but rather God calls out to Moses, in a language of affection ("Moshe, I want you").

God calls out to each of us, as well in a voice gentle and filled with love. Our response is to acknowledge that call and to bring to the service of God all that we have.