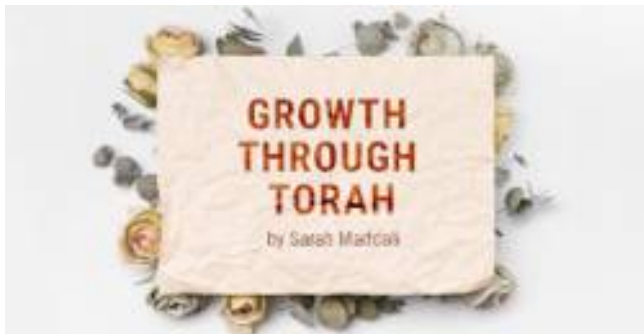


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Hearing God's Call

This week's Torah portion starts off with the verse, "He [God] called (*Vayikra*) to Moses..." Our sages tell us that Moses was scared to enter the Tabernacle, so God *called* Moses to summon him to enter.

Why was Moses apprehensive about entering this holy Tabernacle that God commanded them to build?

Lesson:

The Tabernacle was built as a special meeting place for the Jews and God. God's Presence dwelled in that place. That could seem overwhelming, even scary. When God gave the Torah at Mount Sinai and the Jews received national revelation, the experience was overwhelming. In fact, the Medrash says that after hearing the first two of the ten commandments, their souls jumped out from their bodies; they could not handle the experience. Revived, they asked Moses to be the intermediary between them and God.

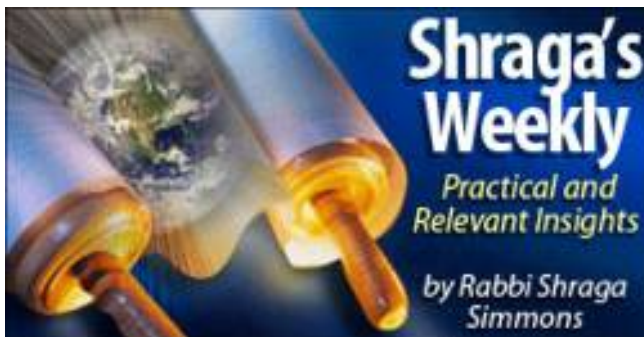
Now God's Presence is dwelling in the Tabernacle. God asked Moses to enter but he was apprehensive.

A famous Torah commentary, *Ramban*, expounds upon this, explaining that God lovingly called (*Vayikra*) Moses to the Tabernacle, explaining that the Tabernacle was built to *enhance* the relationship between God and His special nation, not to be more distant. God could have simply allowed His Presence to dwell on Earth periodically, without a permanent home. However, God wanted a much deeper relationship; He wanted a partnership, a close relationship with His creations, and thus asked us to use materials that He created to construct a holy place where His Presence is tangibly felt. That tangible connection comes through a beautiful synthesis of partnership between man and God, demonstrating how much God desires a relationship with His creations.

But sometimes, like Moses, we feel intimidated. We are struck with awe and pull back in fear. But God is telling us that though we cannot

completely understand or experience God, we are His creations and He wants a relationship with us. And a healthy relationship is not based solely on fear. “Come in, come close,” God beckons, “don’t fear. I want you to come into my sanctuary so we can have a relationship.” God didn’t just call Moses; He lovingly beckons all of us. And just as Moses hears God’s loving call and stands at His service, we too can hear the call and respond similarly.

Exercise: Talk to God today. Ask Him to help you strengthen your relationship with Him.



Animal Offerings

This week's Parsha presents a lengthy, detailed description of animal offerings in the Holy Temple – burning of limbs, sprinkling of blood, flaying of flesh. Modern man may at first find this notion pagan and primitive. It sure sounds quite different from the warm spirituality we imagine our ancestors practicing!

The question becomes increasingly difficult as one considers Judaism's position on care and concern toward animals. Besides the general Biblical prohibition against causing pain to

animals ("*Tzar Baalei Chaim*"), there is also a whole list of separate mitzvot designed for the protection of animals, including: to unload a donkey whose load is too heavy, to give your animal a day off of work on Shabbat, not to muzzle an animal when working in the field (i.e. don't prevent it from eating what it sees), and many, many others.

So why animal offerings? Let's address some basic misconceptions.

Misconception #1: Isn't it cruel to kill an animal?

Why should this bother us? We eat hamburgers and wear leather shoes. We throw footballs and eat Kentucky Fried Chicken (you can even get it kosher in Jerusalem).

So if using animals is justified for physical benefit, then all the more so for spiritual benefit!

(For the record, all offerings had a practical, physical benefit as well. The vast majority were eaten by human beings – e.g. the Passover offering was roasted and eaten at every Seder table! Even with the "all burned offering," the animal's leather was used by the Kohanim.)

Misconception #2: These offerings are a "sacrifice."

The Hebrew word *korbon*, which the Torah uses to describe animal offerings, is not a sacrifice (as in, giving something up), and it is not an offering (as in, bringing a gift to the gods). Rather, *korbon* means "to come near." These help a person get closer to God.

In the Temple, we take the animal parts and elevate them onto the altar of God. This is a personal declaration of intent to elevate our material resources to a higher level – to direct it toward the service of God.

For Whose Benefit?

Which leads us to:

Misconception #3: We think, "What kind of god needs offerings from us? Is this some kind of bribe so he won't be angry with us?"

We have to differentiate between Greek mythology and Judaism. The pagan sacrifices were to appease finite gods who had control over a limited aspect of existence. Every god needed something else and the humans could avoid the wrath of the gods by giving them what they needed.

Jewish offerings are not for God. He doesn't need them. God is All Powerful and has everything already. Rather, the offerings are for us. They teach us to take the physical – the body – and sanctify it.

One of the 613 mitzvot is that the Kohen Gadol must keep the *Ephod* (breastplate) constantly attached. Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch points out that in idolatry, the ceremonial breastplate was typically tied onto the idol. The philosophy was to control the idol and "get it on your side." But in Judaism, the Kohen Gadol ties the breastplate to himself – because it is *ourselves* that we want to control.

Every human being is comprised of two components – the physical body and the spiritual soul. Each part wants to be nourished and

sustained, yet each achieves this in very different ways. The body seeks comfort and immediate gratification: food, sleep, power, wealth. The soul seeks longer-lasting, eternal pleasures: meaning, love, good deeds, connection to God.

The mitzvot of the Torah are designed to guide us toward "soul pleasures." However, when the body exerts dominance, the consequence is a transgression of these mitzvot.

The way to repair that mistake is to bring an offering. The transgressor steps forward and declares: "I have made a mistake and regret the damage it caused my soul. My animal side got the best of me. I don't want to repeat that mistake again. I hereby pledge to slaughter animalism as the dominant force in my life."

Why the Blood and Guts?

When a person sees the animal slaughtered before his eyes, he thinks, "Really I deserve this, but God is merciful and sparing." That's a powerful spiritual experience. Blood is real. It shakes a person. You see the heaviness of life.

Kirk Douglas, the legendary film star, was involved in a serious helicopter crash in 1991. The pilot and co-pilot were killed, but Kirk got out alive.

The event shook him as much spiritually as it did physically. Lying in the hospital bed, he asked himself over and over again: Why was I the one who survived?

Kirk eventually answered his question thusly: I survived because there is something important I have yet to accomplish in this world, a crucial

contribution to make. Up until now I have been playing games. Now I see that life is more serious.

Kirk embarked on a program of regular Torah study and began to re-institute the Jewish traditions he'd remembered from his youth. And he began a search for ways to utilize his material wealth to impact the world. It was a transformation back to himself – despite the peer pressure of secular Hollywood fighting against him.

Today, he's more committed than ever. He recently took on the responsibility of building a multi-media theater across from the Western Wall – in order to give tourists an authentic, inspiring Jewish experience. Kirk is driven to make up for lost time.

Just as in the Temple ... the scene of blood, the proximity to death ... thinking "this could have been me." It changes one's life forever.

Will the Parsha inspire us to change, too?



The Meaning of Sacrifice

In discussing a man's obligation to offer sacrifices, the Torah departs from its usual expression of referring to *man* as "*ish*"; and

instead uses the word "Adam." The passage also begins with the singular verb, "*yakriv* - [he] brings," and then continues with the plural form, "*takrivu* - you shall bring." There is a profound reason for these word choices, for when a person brings a sacrifice to God, he must follow the example of the very first man, Adam, whose offerings were unblemished, free of the slightest taint of dishonesty. Since he was the only person in the world, there was no one he could have deceived or taken advantage of.

There are many ways in which we attempt to rationalize deception and dishonesty. When we allow arrogance to take hold of us and we feel superior to others, we also convince ourselves that our needs are greater than theirs and, therefore, we are entitled to that which belongs to them. That is yet another reason why, when the Torah instructs us regarding sacrifices, it refers to the individual as "Adam," evoking the memory of the first man, who, by virtue of the fact that he was the *first* and *only* one, could not have been guilty of such rationalizations. Even as Adam understood that everything that he possessed came from God, so we, too, must be aware of that fact and approach Him with clean hands. As the psalmist wrote: "Who may ascend the mountain of God ...? One with clean hands and a pure heart"¹

The word for sacrifices is "*korbanos*," derived from the word "*karov* - to come near," teaching us that if we wish to renew our relationship with our Heavenly Father, we must be prepared to sacrifice for His sake, and if we do so, we will discover that the more we give of ourselves, the closer to God we will feel.

MAKE HIS WILL YOUR WILL

In today's self-focused culture, we have been led to believe that our priority must be to ensure our own happiness. Sacrifice - renunciation of self - has become an alien concept. Many people live for themselves and focus on their own needs. All too often, such parents do not sacrifice for their children and such children do not sacrifice for their parents. And this holds true for all their relationships, including those between husband and wife.

It is most blatantly evident, however, in their relationship with God. People make demands upon Him, but are not prepared to give back. "Why, why?" they ask when things do not turn out as they had anticipated ... and it never occurs to them that God may also be asking *Why*? "Indeed, why have you failed to fulfill My commandments? Why have you abandoned My Torah?"

But they never hear the "Why" of God and hear only their own cry.

So, let us search our hearts and ask, *How does God see me? How do I measure up? How much have I sacrificed for His sake? Have I made His will my own?* And if you do not feel as close to Him as you would like, if you do not feel faith motivating your life, ask yourself, *Have I offered Him my heart? Have I sacrificed?*

WE CAN ALL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The question still remains: Why is there a change from the singular to the plural when the Torah discusses bringing this offering? Here, too, is an instructive lesson for all generations. The passage

starts out in the singular because, when a man sins, he believes that his transgressions impact only upon him. But the Torah teaches that that which we do as individuals impacts on everyone and everything around us. Therefore, our Sages compare our predicament as a nation to passengers on a ship. If one should bore a hole under his seat, in vain does he protest, "This is *my* business; the hole is under *my* seat!" His "personal" hole will cause the entire ship, with all its passengers, to sink. The reverse is also true. Repentance and mitzvos not only elevate us as individuals, but they also enrich our community, our nation.

Thus, the passage starts with the singular and ends with the plural, reminding us that our families and our communities are only as strong as the individuals who form them. This is a lesson that can help us in our search for meaning and can validate our lives. We all have a need to make a difference, but we often feel futile in our anonymity and wonder what possible impact we can have. *Parashas Vayikra* reminds us that through our every word, our every deed, we have the power to either elevate or diminish the world. If we bear that in mind, we will find it easier to meet life's challenges with honor and dignity.

IN HUMILITY WE FIND TRUE GREATNESS

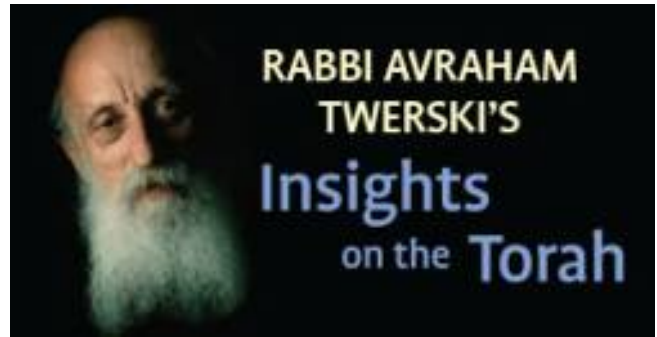
The *parashah* opens with the words, "VAYIKRa *el Moshe* - "And He [God] called to Moses" In a Torah Scroll, the letter *aleph* in the word *vayikra* is written in a smaller size than the rest of the Torah, teaching us that Moses was keenly aware of his unworthiness in being summoned by God.

The word *vayikra*, without the *aleph*, means that God *chanced* to speak to Moses, not that God called him lovingly. Because of his humility, Moses wrote the *aleph* small, to imply that he was less than worthy.

Moses was *the most humble of all men*, but, paradoxically, he was also the greatest. True humility does not imply lack of confidence or unawareness of our God-given talents; rather, it is an affirmation of those Divine gifts. The realization that everything that we possess was given to us by the Almighty and therefore must be wisely used and returned to Him unblemished is most humbling.

A great Sage once illustrated this concept by comparing a person to an impoverished woman who borrows a magnificent gown to wear to a wedding. She cannot be arrogant about the dress, lovely as it is, for she knows that it is not hers and she will soon have to return it in perfect condition. Similarly, the gifts with which God endows us were given to us on loan, and that realization is a very humbling experience. Moses never lost sight of that awareness and it is that which rendered him the humblest of all men. We must bear in mind that the gifts with which we were endowed were not bequeathed to us for our own self-aggrandizement, but for the benefit of mankind. If we realize that unfortunately we have misused or abused those gifts, we will also realize how misplaced and foolish are all feelings of arrogance.

1. Psalms 24:3-4.



Purim Will Never Cease

Commenting on the verse, “And these days of Purim should never cease among the Jews” (Esther 9:28), the Midrash states that even when all the other festivals are discontinued, Purim will always remain. The commentaries give various interpretations on what this Midrash may mean but it is evident from this Midrash that Purim has extraordinary significance, and surpasses in importance even the Scriptural festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. What is it that gives Purim such great significance?

R' Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev explains that supernatural miracles, great as they may be, are of only a temporary duration. The salvation of the Israelites by the dividing of the waters of the Reed Sea was indeed an exceptional occurrence, but it was witnessed only by that generation, and for us it is a historical incident. We do not expect miracles of that type to occur.

The salvation of Purim, however, did not consist of any supernatural miracle. Every event could be seen as a perfectly natural happening. A king becomes intoxicated and in his drunken rage has the queen executed. He chooses a Jewess as his new queen, and she conceals her origin. Her

uncle, who is in the royal court, discovers a palace intrigue to assassinate the king, and the queen reports this to the king, thereby saving his life. The anti-Semitic prime minister extracts a decree from the king to exterminate the Jews in his kingdom. The king is reminded that it was a Jew who saved his life. The queen turns the king's wrath against the prime minister, who is executed. The queen reveals her Jewish origin, her uncle is appointed as prime minister and the Jews are saved.

It is only when the entire sequence of events is put together that one sees the guiding Hand of God saving His people. In all likelihood, during the Purim episode, someone in shul related, "Did you hear what happened yesterday? The king was drunk and flew into a rage and had the queen executed!" A listener probably said, "I couldn't care less about what the king does. Politics is not my thing." At no point did anyone realize that a miracle was in the making.

Miracles such as these are with us today. No laws of nature are suspended, but the guiding Hand of God causes "natural" events to occur in such a way that results in our salvation.

The realization that everything in the world is orchestrated by God is a fundamental principle of Judaism. This teaching of Purim should be with us 354 days of every year. As we say in the Amidah, "for Your miracles are with us every day." This belief enables us to entrust our lives to the care of God, and should stimulate us to live our lives according to His commandments.

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