

Parashat Vayikra 5773, 2013:

Korbanot: The Meaning for Our Time

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Many authentically observant Jews are deeply conflicted about the reinstatement of animal sacrifices. *Korbanot*, as a class of mitzvot that Hashem commanded, present them with no particular problem *per se*, i.e. they *theoretically* accept the obligation to perform these mitzvot with the same respect that they have for all other commandments. The problem for them, however, resides in the return of the *practice* of the *korbanot*. On the emotional level they honestly feel that modern man is alienated from this form of “ancient and bloody” worship. Therefore, they experience a psychological disconnect between what the Torah commands and their 21st century persona.

I honestly believe this observation to be an accurate one, regardless of how many *drashot* (Torah homilies) end with a statement of hope for the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the true Messiah), the ingathering of the exiles, and the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple) - even though these events will unquestionably bring about the reestablishment of the *korbanot*. As the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

King Messiah will arise in the future and return the kingship of David to its former greatness and glory. He will rebuild the Holy Temple and gather all of the exiles to the Land of Israel. All of the laws will be in effect during his days just as they were in earlier times. **We will [once again] offer *korbanot*** and keep the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years just like all of the other laws stated in the Torah. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 11:1)

In my estimation, the absence of an ardent desire to reinstitute the *korbanot* is based upon a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of their meaning.

On measure, the purpose of this form of worship seems elusive to many. As a result, many of our commentators have wrestled with explanations for the *korbanot* that could be “heard” by their generation. In my opinion, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s analysis, as found in his commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 1:2, offers a trenchant treatment of this difficult and seemingly arcane subject.

Rav Hirsch begins his discussion of the word “*korban*” by suggesting, “We have no word which really reproduces the idea which lies in the expression *korban*.” He explains that defining this word by the term “sacrifice” completely fails to denote its authentic meaning. Moreover, since sacrifice “...implies the idea of giving something up that is of value to oneself for the benefit of another, or of having to do without something of value...” it is actually diametrically opposed to the meaning and essence of *korban*. Even the term “offering” fails to communicate what the Torah means by our term: “Also the underlying idea of ‘offering’ makes it by no means an adequate expression for *korban*. The idea of an offering presupposes a wish, a desire, a requirement for what is brought, on the part of the one to whom it is brought, which is satisfied by the ‘offering’. One can not get away from the idea of gift, a present. But the idea of a *korban* is far away from all

this.”

If a *korban* is neither a sacrifice nor an offering, how is it to be defined? Rav Hirsch suggests the following:

It is never used for a present or gift, it is used exclusively with reference to Man’s relation to G-d, and can only be understood from the meaning which lies in the root *krv*. *Krv* means to approach, to come near, and so to get into close relationship with somebody. This at once most positively gives the idea of the object and purpose of *hakravah* (drawing close) as **the attainment of a higher sphere of life**. [Emphasis my own]

This concept of *korban* as the vehicle whereby one obtains “the attainment of a higher sphere of life” is the essence of Rav Hirsch’s understanding of our term. The idea of approaching Hashem in a true I-Thou relationship (in Martin Buber’s sense) via the *korban* thus “...rejects the idea of a sacrifice, of giving something up, of losing something, as well as being a requirement of the One to Whom one gets near...” The *makriv* (he who brings the *korban*) has an overwhelming desire to draw near to his Creator, to communicate, as it were, with Him. The *makriv*, therefore, earnestly wants to have something representing himself “come into a closer relationship to G-d, that is what his *korban* is...” From this perspective, the *korbanot* emerge as a symbolic fulfillment of the celebrated second verse of the *Shema*: “And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means. Therefore, the goal of a *korban* is to enable “*kirvat Elokim*, nearness to G-d” which, by definition, is “the attainment of a higher sphere of life.”

Dovid HaMelech (King David) taught us a powerful and poignant lesson when he declared: “*kirvat Elokim li tov*” (“Closeness to G-d is what is truly good for me,” *Sefer Tehillim* 73:28). This, as Rav Hirsch so eloquently opines, is **the** purpose of a *korban*.

With this in mind, and with our Creator's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to read and study *Sefer Vayikra* with both newfound joy and understanding, and may each of us once again long for the reinstatement of the *korbanot* in Hashem's soon to be rebuilt *Beit HaMikdash*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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