

Vayikra: Korban

- Nisson Shulman.

An analysis of the relevance of korbonot, especially the sin offering. How badly today we need the ability to admit wrong, to confess sin. The sin offering teaches all of these.

VAYIKRA; KORBAN

1. We have just begun the third book of the Torah. A good part of it deals with the service in the Holy Temple. We tend to think about the offerings, or sacrifices in the Holy Temple as obsolete, belonging to another age and psychology, and consequently a good part of Vayikra seems unreal to us. But our Rabbis saw it as very real, to every age and to every society. How so?

2. A great deal has been written about sacrifices. Not everyone realizes that the word is a wrong translation. Karban is a word that comes from karov, meaning to approach or come closer. The purpose of the karban was to bring us closer to God, to fellow man, to Jerusalem, to our families. The Pesach Seder is based on the Pesach Karban, and nothing brings Jewish families together with such strong bonds as does a Pesach Seder. In fact, the other karban offerings, too, were usually enjoyed, like the Paschal offering, by the person or family who brought the Karban. Shelamim, for instance (often called a “peace offering”), was consumed as a feast in the proximity of the Temple, thus bringing the participants closer to God and to each other.

3. But not so the most prominent of the Karbanot, the “sin offering” which we read about in today's Torah reading. Here the one who brought that karban doesn't partake of it. It would be hypocrisy to allow him to benefit from his act of atonement. So the priests are the ones who benefit from that karban. But the whole procedure is to stimulate him to atone for his sin, and therefore, without proper repentance, his karban is meaningless, and bringing a karban without repentance is itself a serious transgression of the Torah law.

4. The Prophets and the Rabbis emphasized that the technical rite of bringing a karban cannot obliterate sin. You can't appease God and giving something to the sanctuary. God's real sacrifice is “the broken and contrite heart” of the penitent (Psalms 51:19). The sinner must really feel “There, but for the love of God, go I”.

5. So the aim of the sin offerings and guilt offerings enumerated in the first chapters of Vayikra is to make a person sensitive to the error of his ways, and to teach him to repent. Genuine repentance cannot come from vague and transient thoughts of remorse. The sinner must boldly face the gravity of his guilt. He then relieves his burden by going to the sanctuary and expressing his feelings there. And the confession of his sin in the sanctuary requires him to resolve never to repeat that transgression. That is the essence of viduy and teshuva, which is part of the karban hatat.

6. Many thinker and writers have disparaged feelings of guilt. They object to the idea that an awareness of guilt is a necessary step in repentance. Certainly in our time, guilt is regarded as a kind of disease that needs urgent treatment by a psychiatrist. In our permissive age, in our time

when people are afraid to look into their own souls, a sense of guilt is considered a symptom of a mental disorder. If everything is allowed, why feel guilty? And in our search for pleasure and tranquillity, who needs the discomfort of a guilt trip?

7. The Torah tells us there is a place for guilt. Guilt resulting from specific wrongdoings indicates a person's healthy urge to return to normalcy. There is of course a great difference between a psychopathic complex, a feeling of excessive guilt for no cause, and the necessary confession of guilt, which leads to repentance. Not all guilt is to be considered a "complex". Some of us are simply guilty!

8. Realizing this, we were instructed to bring a *karban* – not to bribe God – but to lead ourselves out of sin and guilt into the path of repentance.

9. The possibility of making a wrong choice, of making a mistake, is part of the blessing of human freedom. And an important facet of this blessing is the ability to admit mistakes and try to rectify them.

10. No one is infallible. The list of those who are commanded to bring a sin offering starts with the "High Priest" (Leviticus 4:3). For even the highest-ranking religious official is not infallible. He - like everyone else - must acknowledge his mistakes in public, even those committed accidentally.

11. This applies, not only the High Priest, but to the Sanhedrin as well. The highest judicial authority, the recognized leaders of the entire community, must also admit their guilt publicly when they are culpable. Everyone looks up to them for guidance. But they, too, can make mistakes. The Highest Court, dignified and powerful, must have the courage to admit its guilt when necessary and to bring its sin offering.

12. Next on the list is the head of state, the highest power in the land. He, too, must bring a sin offering. Rashi comments: "Happy is that generation whose leaders are ready to admit mistakes". Happy indeed.

13. Considering political reality, not only in ancient times but today as well, a generation whose leaders are ready to take the blame for wrongdoings upon themselves and not pass it on to their political opponents deserves to be praised. As Harry Truman said, "The buck stops here". The High Priest, the High Court's members, the Chief Executive, all of them could easily cover over their mistakes. So the Torah stresses that they are required to admit their guilt and may not employ any kind of cover-up.

14. We have all been appalled by recent school shootings and other instances of juvenile violence. In another context, the Bible describes how the elders of the city must take responsibility for a murder victim of an unsolved crime. They must go through a solemn ceremony in which they declare "Our hands have not shed this blood". The Rabbis of old asked: "Can anyone suspect the city's righteous elders of bloodshed?" They answered: "They did not guard him sufficiently well. Vagabond, wanderer he may be, but the safety of the roads are the responsibility of the city's elders". In this respect, all of us are the city's elders. All of us must

accept some measure of the guilt, for only then will we be sufficiently moved to do something about the safety of all the citizens of all our society.

15. The awareness of guilt is the first step. Remorse over the past must be followed by acceptance of changes in the future. Only then is the way open to full repentance.

16. So the Temple service was to teach these values and require that they be applied. I suggest we can use some of these values today as well.
