**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYIKRA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Vayikra presents the laws regarding the various forms of *korban yachid* – a sacrifice offered by a private individual, either voluntarily or as required to atone for a misdeed. The individual would formally consecrate the animal by verbally declaring its designation as a sacrifice.

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, commenting to the beginning of Parashat Vayikra in his *Tiferet Shelomo*, finds great significance in this preliminary stage of the sacrificial process – the verbal designation of an animal as a sacrifice. He observes that any Jew, regardless of his spiritual stature, is capable of transforming an ordinary animal into an article of sanctity that is then brought upon the altar in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* as an offering to the Almighty. By merely uttering the words, a person fundamentally transforms an animal into something sacred. This ability granted by the Torah testifies to the latent potential for sanctity within each and every individual. No matter how low people might feel they have fallen, or how disconnected they might feel from God and from religious observance, the Torah teaches that they have the capacity to create sanctity. And if we are capable of transforming an animal into something sacred, the *Tiferet Shelomo* writes, then we are *a fortiori* capable of transforming ourselves. The process of sacrificing begins with the verbal consecration specifically to show the individual who seeks atonement or to enhance his connection to God that this is fully attainable – as evidenced by his ability to endow an animal with sanctity.

The *Tiferet Shelomo* further notes that the animal’s status is fundamentally transformed by force of the individual’s proclamation despite no discernible change in the animal. The animal is no different the moment after the consecration than it was before, yet, from a halakhic standpoint, it is an entirely new entity. Symbolically, this points to the fact that spiritual growth and progress cannot necessarily be felt or discerned. Our efforts to improve and to elevate ourselves will not always produce visible, concrete changes. Often, it appears as though we are running into a brick wall, trying to improve but unable to do so. The *Tiferet Shelomo* views the process of *hakdasha* – the verbal consecration of an animal – as a source of assurance that every bit of effort we invest in self-improvement has a significant transformative effect. If the mere utterance of “*harei zo ola*” (“This is hereby a burnt-offering”) transforms an ordinary animal into an object of sanctity, then we are guaranteed that our sincere efforts to improve ourselves have a drastic impact, regardless of whether or not this impact can be tangibly felt.

Sunday

Rashi, in his commentary to Parashat Vayikra (2:1), famously notes the Torah’s unique formulation in reference to a person who offers a *mincha* (meal offering). Unlike in regard to the other voluntary sacrifices, the Torah speaks of a person who chooses to offer a *mincha* with the term “*nefesh*” (literally, “soul”). Based on the Gemara in Masekhet Menachot (104b), Rashi explains that this word is used because the *mincha* offering was usually brought by the underprivileged, who were unable to afford animal sacrifices. A small offering brought by a pauper is especially cherished by God due to the difficult sacrifice this entails, and thus such a person is considered as having offered his “*nefesh*” – his entire being, to the Almighty.

The *Beit Yisrael* (Rav Yisrael Alter, the fourth Rebbe of Ger) raised the question of why we should assume that a pauper bringing a grain offering makes a greater sacrifice than somebody else offering an animal sacrifice. Conceivably, a person of average means who offers a bull as a sacrifice could incur an expense proportionally equivalent to that of a poor person bringing a *mincha*. After all, the animal itself is very costly, and the individual must also travel with his large animal from his home to Jerusalem. Proportional to his income, it is certainly possible that an average person bringing a large animal offering makes no less a financial sacrifice than a needy individual bringing a grain offering.

The *Beit Yisrael* answered that the difference between the two lies in their feelings of pride in their offering. A person bringing a large sacrifice feels confident that he is doing all he can, volunteering to bring a large, expensive animal as an offering to God. The pauper, by contrast, even if his expenditure is proportionally equivalent to that of the first individual, feels insecure. He knows there is a higher standard which he cannot as yet achieve. He realizes he is doing all he can, but he nevertheless feels some degree of uneasiness and discomfort, knowing that his offering is meager. And it is in this sense, the *Beit Yisrael* explained, that the pauper’s offering is especially beloved and cherished by God. It is not the sacrifice per se, but rather the feeling of uneasiness and inadequacy that makes his sacrifice precious – because this is precisely what a personal sacrifice is meant to express. The purpose of bringing a sacrifice is not the offering itself, but rather the emotions it reflects – the desire for more, the longing to reach a higher level of commitment and a closer relationship with God. Feelings of pride over one’s sacrifice, to some extent, undermine the sacrifice’s very purpose, as it is meant to express the sentiment that something is missing, that something is not right, that one wishes to achieve more and be better than he currently is. The most precious sacrifices we make are those which are accompanied by genuine humility, a keen awareness of the fact that we can do more, and a sincere desire to do more. Together with our feelings of pride and satisfaction over the sacrifices we make, we must also recognize that there is always more to achieve, and that we should always be reaching higher.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted Rashi’s comments to Parashat Vayikra (2:1) regarding the special significance of the *mincha* – the grain offering, which was generally brought by a needy individual who could not afford an animal sacrifice. The Torah refers to the person offering a *mincha* with the term “*nefesh*” (“soul”), and Rashi, based on the Gemara (Menachot 104b), explains that this is term is used to express praise for the pauper who offers his “soul” through his offering.

The common understanding of this remark is that although a *mincha* is a small, modest offering, it assumes great significance because of the considerable financial sacrifice made by the pauper, who offers a small portion of his limited grain supply to God. However, some have suggested a different reading of the Gemara’s comment. The difference between a pauper’s meager offering and an ordinary person’s large offering lies not necessarily in the level of financial sacrifice entailed (which, as we noted yesterday, might actually be the same in both cases), but rather in the impression it makes. When an ordinary person brings an animal sacrifice, and people see him bringing a large, respectable voluntary offering, he cannot avoid feeling a degree of pride. Even if his decision to bring an offering was motivated primarily by a sincere desire to enhance his relationship with God, it is all but impossible for his motives to be perfectly pure. Almost invariably, his offering will be accompanied by at least a slight tinge of exhibitionism, or gratification over the respect he is earning among his peers and onlookers. Anytime we do something public and exceptional, our altruism is compromised, if only very slightly, by the admiration we receive. And thus even an idealistically-driven animal offering will, in all likelihood, be less than perfectly sincere, given the justifiable pride that the individual feels when others see him bringing the sacrifice.

The pauper, however, does not experience such pride when he brings his small offering of grain and oil to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. If anything, he feels embarrassed as he makes his way to the *Mikdash* with a meager sacrifice, and he needs to muster courage and resolve to overcome these feelings and proceed with his offering. And it is perhaps in this sense that the Gemara says that the pauper offering a *mincha* is considered as having sacrificed his “*nefesh*.” This might refer not to the level of sacrifice entailed, but rather to the level of sincerity. The pauper’s *mincha* offering is pure and genuine, brought without any accompanying ulterior motives. There is no social benefit to this offering, as there is to the larger sacrifices. The pauper brings his offering with pure, untainted sincerity, as he gains no admiration or notoriety through the sacrifice.

If so, then the Gemara’s comment teaches us to strive for this level of pure authenticity in our religious lives. As mentioned, it is all but impossible to avoid the natural, human desire for the respect, admiration and recognition of others. Nevertheless, *Chazal*’s special praise for the pauper’s meager *mincha* offering teaches us to aspire to pure sincerity, to direct our efforts towards bringing honor to the Almighty rather than bringing honor to ourselves, and that *mitzva* observance is about doing the right thing, and not about winning other people’s respect.

Tuesday

Much has been written about Rashi’s famous comments to Parashat Vayikra (2:1), based on the Gemara (Menachot 104b), regarding the uniqueness of the *mincha* offering – the sacrifice brought from grain, as opposed to animals. Rashi writes that the Torah refers to the person bringing a *mincha* with the term “*nefesh*” (“soul”), because this offering was generally brought by the poor, who could not afford the more expensive animal sacrifices. Such a person, Rashi writes, is considered as offering his “soul” to God because of the special level of sacrifice entailed.

Among the questions raised regarding this comment is whether Rashi’s assumption – that the *mincha* was the least costly option among the voluntary sacrifices – is indeed correct. *Chatam Sofer* cites the *Ba’al Ha-hafla’a* as noting that one could also choose to offer as a sacrifice a small bird – a dove or pigeon (1:14)– which could be assumed to have cost less than a *mincha*. After all, the *mincha* offering included a sizeable portion of flour, as well as olive oil and frankincense, which all together likely cost more than a small bird. We might wonder, then, why the Gemara, as Rashi cites, assumed that the poor would offer *mincha* sacrifices, and not bird sacrifices.

*Chatam Sofer* suggests a fascinating answer to this question, postulating that the Gemara speaks here of a pauper who does not even have money for his basic necessities, and relies upon charity for his sustenance. The only access this mendicant pauper has to food is charitable gifts such as *leket*, *shikhecha* and *pei’a* – the portions of agricultural fields which the owners are required to leave for the needy. As this is the pauper’s sole source of sustenance, his only option for offering a sacrifice is a *mincha*, which he brings from a portion of grain which he collected when taking the produce left by landowners for the poor. He cannot bring a bird offering, because he does not have money to purchase a bird, and so the only sacrifice he can offer is a *mincha.* For this reason, *Chatam Sofer* explains, this individual is considered as having sacrificed his soul to God, as he takes a portion of the meager rations he has to eat for the purpose of offering a sacrifice to the Almighty.

This discussion perhaps reminds us of the need to feel grateful for our blessings even in times of hardship. *Chatam Sofer* here speaks of a mendicant who is forced to collect the gleanings of other people’s crops in order to survive, and yet he still feels moved and inspired to offer a portion of what he has to the Almighty as an expression of his devotion. Generally, people enduring difficult challenges are too embittered and distraught to make altruistic sacrifices, or to recognize and feel grateful for the good things their lives. The situation described by *Chatam Sofer*, of a pauper who allocates a portion of the grain he received through charity for a sacrifice, showing gratitude for what he has received, should inspire us to recognize and appreciate our blessings even if they at first seem meager, and to be grateful for what we have even in periods of hardship.

Wednesday

Parashat Vayikra begins by outlining the various types of *ola* sacrifices – animal sacrifices which were entirely burnt upon the altar (as opposed to sacrifices that were partially eaten). One who wished to bring an *ola* had the option of bringing either a bull, a sheep or goat, or a bird.

A number of commentators noted a subtle distinction between the Torah’s introduction of the bird *ola* and its introductions of the other *ola* sacrifices. In introducing the others, the Torah simply writes, “If his burnt-offering is from the herd,” or “If his burnt-offering is from the flock of sheep” (1:3,10). In reference to the bird sacrifice, however, the Torah writes, “*Ve-im min ha-of ola korbano* ***le-Hashem***” – “And if his burnt-offering **to the Lord** is from the birds” (1:14). Curiously, in this context the Torah emphasizes that the sacrifice is offered “to the Lord,” despite this quite obviously being the case whenever one offers any *ola* sacrifice.

A number of different explanations have been offered for this nuance. *Or Ha-chayim* cites the Gemara’s ruling in Masekhet Kiddushin (24) that bird offerings are unique in that birds with physical defects and deformities are acceptable as sacrifices. When it comes to all other animal sacrifices, an animal with a physical blemish is disqualified as an offering, and the Torah strictly forbids sacrificing such an animal. Birds, however, are not subject to these restrictions. As such, one might have assumed that a bird offering is of a lesser stature of sanctity or importance, as reflected by the more lenient standards that apply to it. For this reason, the Torah found it necessary to emphasize that even this sacrifice is offered “*le-Hashem*” – as an offering to the Almighty, and has the same stature as other burnt-offerings.

*Panim Yafot* offers a different suggestion, explaining that the bird *ola* differs from other sacrifices in that the *kohanim* do not receive anything at all from the offering. Animal *ola* sacrifices are skinned after slaughtering, before the animal is placed on the altar, and the *kohanim* are given the skins for them to use. When a bird sacrifice is offered, however, the entire bird is burned, with nothing going to the *kohanim*. One might have therefore thought that a bird *ola* is less significant a sacrifice, given that nobody receives any benefit whatsoever from the animal. The Torah dispels this misconception by emphasizing that even this sacrifice is “*le-Hashem*,” a meaningful and lovingly accepted offering to God.

The *Panim Yafot*’s explanation perhaps reminds us that *mitzvot* are valuable even if when we cannot discern tangible benefits. The Torah emphasizes that although the bird offering does not appear to provide practical benefit to anybody, it is nevertheless a precious offering cherished by the Almighty. If we perform a *mitzva* with sincerity and in compliance with Torah law, then we have done a precious act regardless of whether or not we can point to any tangible positive effect.

Thursday

*Ba’al Ha-turim* makes a famous comment on the opening word of Sefer Vayikra – “*va-yikra*” (“He called”) – which tells of God calling Moshe into the *Mishkan* after its construction. The final letter of this word, *alef*, is traditionally written smaller than the other letters in the *Sefer Torah*, and *Ba’al Ha-turim* explains that Moshe, in his great humility, requested that the word be written without the letter *alef*, as “*va-yikar*.” This is the term used to described God’s prophetic revelations to Bilam, as we read in Sefer Bamidbar (23:4,16), and Rashi (Bamidbar 23:4) notes that this word is understood as reflecting God’s displeasure, as it were, appearing to Bilam. The word “*va-yikar*” is associated with “*mikreh*” – “happenstance,” thus indicating that God spoke to Bilam only as necessitated by the occasion, because of how things happened to turn out, but did not truly seek a connection with him. Moshe humbly requested that his invitation into the newly-built *Mishkan* be described with the term “*va-yikar*,” rather than “*va-yikra*,” as “*va-yikra*”would indicate his stature of distinction and God’s special affection for him as He invites him into His abode. God denied Moshe’s request, but did agree as a sort of compromise to have the letter *alef* written in small print, alluding to Moshe’s wish that it be omitted.

It has been suggested that this distinction between “*va-yikar*” and “*va-yikra*” is relevant not only to prophets, but to all people, and reflects the different ways we can react to our experiences in life. Any experience can be perceived as a “*mikreh*,” a random circumstance, with no particular meaning and not necessarily warranting any sort of serious response on our part. Alternatively, however, we can perceive life’s experiences as “*va-yikra*” – a calling, an opportunity, an invitation to enter the “*Mishkan*,” so-to-speak, to do something worthwhile and significant. If we end up somewhere we did not wish to be, or encounter a situation which we hoped to avoid, we can, in many such instances, approach the undesirable circumstance as an “invitation,” a chance to accomplish something meaningful. If, for example, somebody did not receive the job or position he sought, and is forced into a less enjoyable or rewarding job, he has the choice of viewing the situation as one of “*va-yikar*,” a random, unfortunate development which he needs to begrudgingly accept, or of viewing his circumstance as “*va-yikra*,” an opportunity to embrace and to make the most of.

Of course, not every undesirable circumstance can necessarily be transformed into a precious opportunity. Sometimes, we have no choice but to humbly accept an unfortunate situation and get through it as best we can. But very often, we are able to embrace undesirable circumstances and find within them the hidden blessings and opportunities that they offer us. Once we identify the “invitation” concealed within the unwanted circumstance, we can respond by entering the “*Mishkan*,” by seizing the opportunity for personal growth and achievement.

Friday

The Gemara (Menachot 104b), cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Vayikra (2:1), notes the special significance of the voluntary *mincha* sacrifice – an offering of grain which was generally brought by the poor. The *mincha* was simpler and less impressive than the costlier animal sacrifices, but the Torah expresses special praise for the individual offering a *mincha*, referring to him with the term “*nefesh*” (“soul”). As Rashi writes, a pauper offering a small, simple *mincha* is considered to have “sacrificed his soul” given the special degree of sacrifice entailed.

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein (*Yad Yechezkel*, p. 173) applied the Gemara’s statement to spiritual “poverty,” as well. He gave the example of a person with a genuine and passionate commitment to Torah study, but who does not have the luxury of devoting large amounts of time to learning, due to the difficulties he faces trying to secure a livelihood. If the demands of his quest for a livelihood leave him with hardly any free time for Torah study, but he nevertheless manages to allocate an hour each day for learning, then that hour is akin to the humble *mincha* offering brought by a pauper. That hour is especially precious, Rav Levenstein said, because it entailed great sacrifice. Just as a meager *mincha* offering is deemed more valuable than a robust offering brought by a wealthy person, similarly, an hour allocated for Torah study by a harried, pressured husband and father working arduously to support his family is worth more than a full day of intensive study by somebody who does not have such pressures.

Rav Levenstein made these remarks to the students of the Mir Yeshiva when they arrived in Shanghai, where they had fled during World War II. The turmoil of relocating in a different continent across the world, and living in a new, foreign environment, quite obviously compromised the students’ ability to realize their scholarly and spiritual aspirations. Rav Levenstein sought to assure them that although they would likely be unable to achieve and grow to the same extent under the current circumstances as they did back in Europe, nevertheless, their modest achievements were precious like the pauper’s *mincha*. In situations of great challenge and hardship, small achievements are especially meaningful, even more so than great achievements reached under favorable conditions.

The Gemara’s comments regarding the *mincha* teach us that the value of any “offering” we bring is assessed not in absolute terms, but in relation to our capabilities under the circumstances. Every area of religious life will be more difficult for some people than it is for others, given their individual characteristics, their background and their current conditions. We need to achieve to the best of our ability in each area, recognizing that in areas of “wealth” – where we are capable of more – we should be aspiring for more, and in areas of “poverty” – where our potential is more limited – we should have realistically modest ambitions and achieve the most we can under the circumstances.

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