



In Memory
of our beloved

David Schwartz

who fell in battle
27th day of the month of Tevet, 5784
(8 January 2024)

David wrote thoughts on each of the weekly Torah readings taken from the core of the Torah that he studied in depth with his unique spirit. The Torah thoughts were originally published on the occasion of his marriage to Meital.

His Torah insights are shared now for the elevation of his pure soul and for the sanctification of his blessed memory

Parshat Vayikra

From "Le'David Barchi Nafshi" ("Of David, Bless the Lord, O My Soul")

Words of Torah according to the weekly Torah reading by David Schwartz, z"l

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Vayikra opens with the laws of sacrifices. Another name for the book in Hebrew is *Torat Kohanim*, or the Laws of Priests. While the English name "Leviticus" comes from the word Levites (i.e., priests), the Hebrew title focuses our attention on the first word, "call," reminding us of the "call" of God to the priests and to all of us.

Several types of sacrifices appear one after the next at the opening of the book: the *Olah* (Burnt Offering), the *Mincha* (Cereal), the *Zevah HaShelamim* (Well-Being), the *Hatat* (Purification), and the *Asham* (Reparation). Our sages taught: "The world stands on three things: On the *Torah*, *avodah*, and acts of righteousness" (Avot, 1:2). *Avodah*, which in Hebrew means service, was literally the action of bringing sacrifices to God (Taanit, 27b). The Torah instructs us that bringing an animal offering may atone for a person's sins. But at first glance, there is no connection between the sacrifice of an animal and a person himself. What is the explanation for this action of slaughtering an animal, and how does this practice atone for the actions of man? Let us first look at how Maimonides explains this.

Maimonides (*Rambam*, 1138-1204) in *The Guide for The Perplexed* writes that in the past, the idol worshippers brought sacrifices to animals and demons. The Egyptians worshiped Aries (Latin, a ram), and others (the Sabians) worshiped a ghost demon, and the Hindus in India did not slaughter cattle because of their veneration for it. In order to eradicate these false principles, the Torah instructs us to sacrifice these three animals (Lev. 1:2). "Thus," Maimonides tells us, "the very act which is considered by idolaters as the greatest sin, becomes the way to approach God and obtain pardon. In this way, evil concepts, the diseases of the human soul, are cured by diametrically opposite concepts." Maimonides explained that the Torah instructs us to offer sacrifices in order to uproot a social norm of the past that corrupted. In order to destroy the memory of that norm, God commanded us to

offer animal sacrifice in order to uproot idolatry from the hearts of Israel.

Nachmanides (*Ramban*, 1194-1270) argues forcefully against Maimonides. He writes in his introduction to Vayikra that the commandment to perform sacrifices is intended for purification of sins and to glorify the Divine Presence at the *mishkan*. He explains (verse 9) that just as man performs his actions through movements, speech and thoughts, so likewise God commanded that man should make the movement of placing hands on the animal, verbally confess his sin, and then burn the inwards and the kidneys of the sacrificial animal in fire because they parallel the inner aspects of thought and desire in the human being. In this way, Nachmanides writes, "A person realizes that he sinned with his body and mind, and that his blood should really be spilled and his body burned ... its blood is in place of his blood, its life in place of his life."

It follows from this explanation of Nachmanides that at the core of the sacrifice are the thoughts in the heart that result from the service. A similar idea that "God desires the heart" would be strongly emphasized centuries later in the hasidic teachings of *Baal Shem Tov* (1698-1760). As a person offers a sacrifice, he understands that action replaces his own body before God. For Nachmanides, in his biblical commentary, the sacrifice causes man to reflect and this brings about the repentance and atonement.

In my humble opinion, that opinion is difficult to fully accept as it only clarifies the need for the sin and guilt offerings. The problem remains regarding daily sacrifices and for the Sabbath and holiday worship, which do not serve a function connected to sin. Yet, we can continue to carefully study the commentary of Nachmanides in his introduction to Vayikra for additional insight. Nachmanides explains that while the goal of the sacrifices may be



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grasped through a traditional understanding, there really is a secret, which is higher and exalted, that explains this practice.

Nachmanides draws a connection between our service before God and the emanating Divine Providence that supports the world. As it states: The world stands on three things: The *Torah*, *Avodah*, and acts of righteousness" (Avot 1:2). This means that our actions in this world, the sacrificial service, caused the Divine Presence to rest in the mishkan, and the value of this teaching remains strongly in force in our time. The pillar of righteous actions to support the world still stands firm and may be strengthened by us now more than ever. In contrast, the pillar of the sacrificial service in the Temple is no longer present, but our sages have shown us a way to raise up prayers in the interim. As they taught (Ber. 26b): The patriarchs instituted the prayers, but the sages established the prayer service on the foundation of sacrificial offerings. Clearly, the idea of praying to God did not start at the destruction of the Temple, as the holy patriarchs and prophets prayed to God in prior centuries. It means that the sages established our prayer rituals on the foundation of the sacrificial laws. In prior days, the prayers had been entirely personal and depended on the status of the individual praying. After the destruction, prayers became the principal way to communicate with our Father in heaven. It is fitting to conclude with the words of R. Yonah Gerondi (d. 1264) in his commentary on Mishna Avot (1:3).

"On the *Avoda*" (Avot 1:3): The Holy One chose Israel from all of the nations and Israel from all of the lands, and He chose Jerusalem from all of the land of Israel, and He chose Zion from all of Jerusalem... And above all He chose the Temple as the place of the *Avodah*, or sacrificial service. As it is stated in Vayikra 1:3: "in accordance with His will, before the Lord." Behold, it was on account of the *Avodah* that the entire world was created. Then, due to our sins, the Temple was destroyed and the service was annulled. And we are left with prayer of the lips in its place. As the sages said (Ta'anit 2a): 'And serve him with all your hearts' (Deuteronomy 10:12) - "What service is there in the heart? one

should say this is prayer." And this is the meaning of: "Lord, open my lips" (Psalm 51:17). King David is saying: "Had I been able to bring a sacrifice to atone for myself, I would have brought it. Now that I cannot, 'Lord, open my lips and let my mouth say your praise.' Accept my prayer in place of a sacrifice and let it atone me for my sin." We do not have sacrifices of any sort or sin offerings to atone for us. But we can call out to the Lord - "Lord, open my lips." May God hear our call of prayer in place of the sacrifices."