

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Better is one who studies two orders (sedarim) of the Mishnah and is conversant in them than one who studies halachot (laws) and is not conversant in them out of a desire to be known as one adept in halachot... Better is one who gives Tzedakah from money that is his own, than the one who goes and robs others in order to give tzedakah just so that he might be called a charitable person...better is a handful [of the flour] of the mincha offering of a poor man than the finely ground incense offering of the congregation...it carries with it expiation while the later does not. (abridged and adapted from Vayikra Rabbah 3:1 Margoliot ed. pp. 54-59)

One might presume from the ordering of the sacrifices at the beginning of the Sefer Vayikra that bigger is better – the larger and more expensive the animal offered the greater its significance and potency. And this is, indeed, often true in the everyday human realm. Grand gestures are celebrated, while modest ones barely register. The goal is to make an impression. And indeed, without faith, what value is there in what goes unnoticed? If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, did it really make a sound?

According to the midrash, the *mincha* offering provides a sharp rebuke to this way of thinking, reminding us that **God** notices. And unlike the society around us, God values quality over quantity, quiet competence over an inflated resume, a modest gift of what is truly yours over a grand gift made with resources that are stolen or otherwise unearned. Ultimately, the Torah teaches us that an act's significance does not lie in the impression it makes on others, but on the impression it makes on you.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayikra

Shabbat Zachor

March 16, 2019 | 9 Adar II 5779

Annual | Leviticus 1:1-5:26 (Etz Hayim p. 585; Hertz p. 410)
Triennial | Leviticus 4:27-5:26 (Etz Hayim p. 599; Hertz p. 419)
Maftir | Deuteronomy 25:17-19 (Etz Hayim p. 1135; Hertz p. 856)
Haftarah | 1 Samuel 15:2-34 (Etz Hayim p. 1281; Hertz p. 995)

D'var Torah: Simple Gifts

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Sefer Vayikra opens with a survey of the voluntary/free-will sacrificial offerings. It begins with the largest, and seemingly most significant, offerings: bulls, sheep, and goats, continues with pigeons and doves, and finishes the survey with the *mincha* (grain) offering, seemingly the least impressive and least significant of the free-will offerings. It is easy to be unimpressed by the *mincha* offering, since it was the least expensive offering, and mostly brought by those with the least means.

Oddly, the wording used to introduce the *mincha* offering was unique among these sacrifices. All of the other offerings are introduced with the phrase: "Should any **adam** (person) from you bring an offering" (1:2). But with regard to the *mincha* offering, the Torah uses the language: "Should a **nefesh** (person) bring forward a grain offering" (2:1). Why the change from "**adam**" to "**nefesh**?"

While both mean "person," the word "**nefesh**" also means "self." The following midrash picks up on this, reading the change from "**adam**" to "**nefesh**" as emphasizing the "will" of the person making the offering. It is essential for God that the *mincha* offering be brought with the "right will." The midrash moves the discussion of this idea through a number of subjects, in the end, winding its way back to the significance of the *mincha* sacrifice:

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D'var Haftarah: Conflicting Values

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Shabbat, Shabbat Zachor, is the second of four Shabbatot before Pesach where there is a special maftir Torah reading and haftarah. On this Shabbat before Purim, the maftir reading recounts the transgressions of the tribe of Amalek which viciously attacked the children of Israel in the desert after their exodus from Egyptian bondage. This week's haftarah offers a later episode in this saga from the generation of Shaul HaMelech, the first king of Israel. Shaul is commanded by God, through the prophet Shmuel, to totally proscribe the Amalekites, including their king and their property: "Now, go and strike down Amalek, and put under the ban everything that he has, you shall not spare him, and you shall put to death man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." (verse 3 – Alter translation)

In the biblical telling of the story, Shaul gets himself in trouble with God and the prophet Shmuel because he only partially carries out God's command, sparing the life of Agag, the king of the Amalekites as well as the choicest of the Amalekite livestock. Shmuel calls Shaul to task for not abiding by God's word as commanded.

For the modern reader, this is profoundly disturbing. The idea of a divine command to obliterate a people, combatants and innocents, is difficult to accept, no matter what the circumstances. Our conflicted feelings regarding this story are shared by the Sages who composed the following dialogue between Shaul and God (note the remarkable similarity to the conversation between God and Avraham about the Sodom and Gomorrah):

Rabbi Mani said: 'When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Shaul: Now go and smite Amalek, Shaul said: If on account of one person the Torah said: Perform the ceremony of the heifer whose neck is to be broken [on finding a murder victim] – (See Deut. 21), how much more [ought consideration be given] to all these lives! And if human beings sinned, what sin have the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the children done? A divine voice came forth and said: 'Do not be overly righteous.' (Ecclesiastes 7:9)" (adapted from Yoma 22b)

In this retelling of the story, Shaul takes up a moral argument with God. He confronts God about the injustice of collective punishment, bringing as support the "egla arufah" ritual from the Torah - in which a city's leaders must seek expiation from God for not having prevented the murder of a single innocent. Despite knowing how the story ends - with Shaul stripped of his kingship - Rabbi Mani felt compelled to challenge the justice of God's command. But the story ultimately ends with our being told not to be "overly righteous."

Perhaps the midrash here is telling us not to expect clarity and certainty from our tradition - neither about what is right nor what is wrong. After all, our Torah is filled with contradictory models - the same Avraham that challenges God over the righteousness of wiping out Sodom readily acquiesces to God when told to sacrifice Isaac. The Torah does not help us escape the profound value tensions that are part of human existence - they sharpen them. Ultimately we must choose how to honor the complexity, even as we choose which stories, which values, to emphasize and privilege.

Parashat Vayikra Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are opening the 3rd book of Torah - Leviticus. In addition, Purim will be celebrated on March 20-21 so here are also some questions on Megillat Esther.

- 1) The first chapters of Vayikra (Leviticus) read like a manual for sacrificing. It presents a great many possible sacrifices, but for the first 3 chapters there is no indication as to why a person is sacrificing. What do you think might be the reason for a sacrifice, and why is such a reason not stated?
- 2) Chapter 2 gives instructions for sacrifices that are not from the living. Why do you think that such a category existed? If sacrifices have a symbolic aspect, what do you think that these symbolize?

Megillat Esther

- 3) The dates in the Megillah are given both as they appear in the Torah ("the Tenth month", "the Twelfth month" ...) and by the Babylonian names ("Tevet" "Adar"). What might you conclude from this duality?
- 4) After the proclamation of Haman's decree to kill all the Jews, Mordechai demands of Esther that she go to the king and beg for her people. If she won't go, thinking that she is safe in the palace, that help will come from other quarters, but Esther and her father's house will perish (4:8-14). What do you think that Mordechai meant?
- 5) Esther begs the king to repeal Haman's decree to kill the Jews (8:3-14) but it turns out to be impossible: a law signed by the king cannot be repealed. What is the problem with such a legal system? In the Megillah this is solved by issuing a counter law. What would such a law say and what is the result of these conflicting laws?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org