

Sacrifices in Our Day

נ"ה

Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Vayikra

This week we begin our reading of the Book of Leviticus. The Temple sacrifices constitute the main theme of Leviticus, and we may well wonder what relevance the sacrificial cult has for us today, in view of both our modern consciousness and the destruction of the Temple two millennia ago.

As we survey the history of our relationship with G*d, we find, at every step of the way, that G*d leads us to greater sophistication and maturity. G*d arranged for Adam and Eve to be sent out of Eden into the world, in order that we might not remain eternally children. G*d inspired Abram to understand that there is but one G*d and not the many gods which Abram's people worshipped. Then, when Abraham brings Isaac as an offering to G*d, G*d teaches Abraham that human sacrifice is no longer acceptable, for Abraham has reached a level of spiritual maturity that has transcended human sacrifice. In the Book of Exodus, G*d leads us out of Mitzrayim (the Narrow Place), teaching us that we are no longer to be slaves, the property of others, but that we are to bear responsibility for our own actions.

In the Book of Leviticus, we learn that our offerings to G*d are not to be "catch as catch can," but carefully structured. The child wants to act immediately upon the urge, the desire, to give to G*d; the adult understands that the gratification of making an offering to G*d may need to be delayed until the place and time are just right, that the offering is even greater when it is presented in accordance with G*d's Instructions.

Then, in the year 70 CE, the Temple, the Place where our offerings were to be brought, was destroyed. Traditional interpretations dictate that this destruction was

Sacrifices in Our Day

© Copyright 2004 Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

This document may not be reproduced (in whole or in part) in any manner, including, without limitation, print and electronic media, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

but temporary (“due to our many sins”), but we, in our modern (or, perhaps, “post-modern”) consciousness, can offer another understanding.

Maimonides states that we were authorized to bring animal sacrifices to G*d only because the peoples around us did so. The spectacular and dramatic ritual of the animal sacrifice was intoxicating, alluring, and G*d was concerned – so Maimonides tells us – that the appeal of those animal sacrifices might tempt us away from G*d-worship. If it is so – and the logic seems reasonable – then we may understand the destruction of the Temple (especially in light of the cessation of animal sacrifices by other peoples) as G*d’s message that we are henceforth to offer the words of our lips rather than (not merely as a substitute for) the sacrifices.

Yet we are still expected to sacrifice. How so, if we no longer bring animals or other offerings and if the Temple no longer stands? The essence of the sacrifice was that the one who brought the sacrifice offered to G*d something of his or her own, something of value. Today, we measure wealth by money or by available time, and we can bring our money and our time to G*d. Further, just as the meat of the sacrifices (and the grain of the grain offerings) went to feed the priests (who had no other source of nourishment), so we make our offerings to G*d by aiding the needy, by feeding the hungry. And, just as the sacrifices served the function of purifying the Altar of the Temple (which was built of earth), so we make our offerings by supporting a renewal and a replenishing of the earth.

As we bring our offering to assist those in need, to renew and replenish the earth, to make this a better world, we rebuild the Temple – not as a physical structure, but as a spiritual concept.

Shabbat Shalom.