

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Terumah

In this week's parsha, Parshat Terumah, G-d commanded the Jews to build the Tabernacle. The Sefer HaChinuch (author unknown, published 1523) explains that one of the main functions of the Tabernacle was to be a central place where sacrifices were brought to G-d. Both personal and communal sacrifices were brought in the Tabernacle. Some were sacrificed daily, while others were brought on holidays, special occasions, or as an atonement for a sin that was committed.

At first glance the concept of bringing animal sacrifices seems puzzling. Why does G-d want animals to be burned? How is this a service of G-d and how does it atone for sins? The Sefer HaChinuch explains that bringing sacrifices is a symbolic way of serving G-d. When a person brings a sacrifice he/she is acknowledging that what is being done to the animal should really have been done to him/her. Bringing a sacrifice is a declaration to G-d in recognition of one's sin and accepting the need for atonement. G-d put people on this world to serve him, and when one sins, he/she is not fulfilling the purpose of life. In fact, the Sefer HaChinuch points out, that when one brings a sacrifice he/she should pray to G-d that the animal's life should be accepted in place of his/her own, the animal's blood in place of his/her blood, and the animal's limbs in place of his/her limbs. The essence of a sacrifice is the acceptance of G-d's judgement and complete subordination to His will.

Rabbi Shmshon Refael Hirsh (1808-1888) explains that for this reason, whenever a sacrifice is brought, the owner does smicha, leaning on the animal. This is an act of prostrating and bowing in front of G-d, a sign of subordination. With this in mind we can understand a statement our forefather Abraham made to his two servants when he departed from them on his way to sacrifice his son Isaac. He told them to wait for him to return because he and Isaac were going to prostrate themselves in front of G-d. Why would Abraham tell them he is going to merely to prostrate himself in front of G-d when he was really going to do much more? How could Abraham lie to them? Rabbi Hirsh explains that Abraham understood that a sacrifice of any kind is nothing more than a statement of subservience to G-d. This is the same statement that is made by prostration.

With this in mind, only one who understand what a sacrifice represents can effectively bring one that will find favor in the eyes of G-d. One who does not understand the meaning of sacrifice and sees it to be a mere "pay-off" to G-d, will not find favorable results.

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The Torah tells us in Parshat Balak how Balaam, the evil sorcerer and prophet, was hired by King Balak to curse the Jews. He told Balak to bring sacrifices to G-d in hope of finding favor in His eyes. This would have allowed them to successfully curse the Jews. Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go [to curse the Jews]." (Numbers 23:3) This is in stark contrast to the smicha, leaning, that the Torah requires when a sacrifice is brought. Balaam thought that a sacrifice was a way of attaining the power needed to accomplish a goal. He told Balak to stand, symbolizing the control that Balaam thought Balak was attaining. However, the opposite was in fact true. By thinking that he could control G-d, and coerce G-d into fulfilling his will, he was not subordinating himself to G-d, but rather denying G-d's complete ruling over the world. Naturally the result of the attempts of Balak and Balaam were a complete failure.

Although we no longer have a Tabernacle or a Temple, or any place to bring sacrifices, we can still achieve the goal that a sacrifice was meant to achieve. The Talmud (Menachos 110a) tells us that if one who studies the laws of sacrifices it is considered as if he/she brought those sacrifices. One who internalizes the messages of sacrifices, and understands what they represent it is as if he brought a sacrifice. One subordinates himself to G-d, and understands that everything comes from Him and that one must listen to His word, and follow his Torah, has truly accomplished the purpose of a sacrifice, and will receive the full benefit of doing so.

A similar idea is expressed by the prophet Hoshea, Unishalam parim safaisainu-Our lips will take the place of the bulls (Hoshea 14:3). Prayer is another way of showing our subordination to G-d. When one prays he/she is recognizing that everything that happens to him/her is decided by G-d and accepts G-d as his/her king. When one does this, G-d accepts the "sacrifice" and gives great reward to the one who brought it.

Shabbat Shalom!

