

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vayikra

Nachmanides explains that the Book of *Vayikra* primarily discusses laws relating to the sacrifices or the Temple. The Book of Exodus ended with the completion of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), and the Torah now goes into detail as far as the service done therein. The first section in *Parshat Vayikra* deals with the olah, elevation offering, and describes how one can either bring animals or birds as an olah. Then it says one can even bring a simple meal-offering, made of just flour, oil, and frankincense, if he or she cannot afford to bring animals or birds.

The Mishna (*Menachot 110a*) says the Torah describes the animal offering, the bird offering, and the meal offering all as “a fire offering, providing a satisfying aroma to Hashem.” This teaches us whether one gives a lot or a little, any type of offering pleases G-d, as long as the person directs his heart to Heaven. Whether one spends a lot of money on an expensive animal, or if he only can afford the more modest bird offering, or even if he is so strapped for money that he can only afford a meal offering, G-d finds favor in his offering if he offers in a sincere way.

How does this teaching about the sacrifices jive with the instruction of the Talmud, based on another verse in the Torah, to beautify our mitzvot? The Talmud (*Shabbat 133b*) explains the verse, “This is my G-d and I will make Him beautiful” to mean we should spend extra money to enhance the aesthetic quality of the objects we use for mitzvot. “Make in front of Him a beautiful *sukkah*, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful *tzitzit*, a beautiful Torah scroll written with beautiful ink by an expert scribe, and wrap it with beautiful wrappings.” Is the Torah lowering the standards with regards to sacrifices, as if to say everything is equally accepted? Why does the Talmud not suggest to beautify one’s sacrifice by bringing a better quality offering?

Perhaps we could differentiate between mitzvah objects which will be around even after the mitzvah is performed with them, such as a Torah scroll, versus an offering which will become completely consumed on the Altar and will not be seen. Perhaps we only ought to beautify mitzvot when the object of the mitzvah will remain. However, this cannot be the difference, because one of the examples of objects we should make beautiful is the *lulav*, which shortly after the holiday of Sukkot dries up and must be discarded. Apparently, the idea of beautifying the object of the mitzvah is not so there should be any permanence to this beauty, but rather that while the mitzvah is being performed, it should be done in a beautiful way.



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A more compelling way to explain the above Mishna about sacrifices is that because of the intrinsic nature of a sacrifice, it can take many forms. Surely if one has the means and he wants to bring a *korban olah*, he ought to bring an animal as opposed to a bird or meal-offering. The Torah is not endorsing mediocrity when it comes to doing *mitzvot*, no less than it encourages us to write a beautiful Torah scroll as opposed to an average, more simple scroll. Rather the Torah means to educate us that the goal of the sacrifice, as the hebrew word *korban* denotes, is to bring oneself closer to G-d. In this vein, Rashi (2:1) comments that the Torah describes the person as “a soul who brings a sacrifice” only with regards to the meal offering. Why? If a poor person brings a meal offering, says Rashi, Hashem considers it as if he has offered his soul. He should not hesitate to bring a sacrifice in the Temple because of his meager means since Hashem considers his self-sacrifice precious.

The closeness to G-d achieved by sacrifices is inasmuch as the person sacrifices of himself in order to bring himself closer to G-d. Therefore, the wealthy man will not achieve this closeness by bringing an inexpensive meal offering since it does not require much self-sacrifice on his part, much like it requires very little self-sacrifice for a millionaire to give a \$10 donation. However, when a poor man spends just as much, scraping together \$10 to buy some flour and oil for a meal-offering, his sacrifice and hence his closeness to G-d, are much greater. Therefore, we find several passages in the Prophets in which various prophets chastise the people for the way they bring the sacrifices. G-d says He does not want their many sacrifices, but rather their sincere dedication and longing for His closeness. When He does not see this dedication, then the elaborate expensive sacrifices lose their charm and appeal.

Self-sacrifice does not come only in the form of buying offerings to give in the Temple. People can sacrifice in a myriad of ways by doing religious acts to bring glory to G-d or by doing acts of kindness to help other people in their times of need. This Shabbat is the seventh of Adar, and there is a custom to make a festive meal to honor the *chevra kadisha*, the burial society, on this day. Since Moshe died on this day and G-d Himself buried him, we specifically honor those involved in this selfless, thankless act on this day. It is not a coincidence that the day we honor the self-sacrifice of these dedicated community volunteers coincides with *Parshat Vayikra*, a portion that teaches us the meaning of sacrifice.

Shabbat Shalom!

