

Parashat Vayikra: A Guaranteed Reward!

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Dear Friends,

For the modern reader, the book of Vayikra is the most challenging among the five books of the Torah. I face this difficulty every year in my work with the bar mitzvah families whose children's ceremonies take place in the spring. There are those who ignore their distaste and just go with the flow. Others call us up and beg to have their parasha changed.

Both of these responses are really missed opportunities for a tremendous Jewish experience.

I will state in advance that Vayikra is the deepest among the books of the Torah, and in that sense it is the basis for Jewish spirituality to this day. Those who are willing to confront its challenges will be greatly rewarded, I guarantee it!

A classic Jewish mechanism for coping with challenge is asking questions. Jews are the biggest nudniks in the world. They don't stop questioning and searching, because they are in constant search of living water.

Pesach is almost here. The central part of the Hagaddah is the Maggid, which begins with the Four Questions. Our Sages argued amongst themselves whether the Ma Nishtana contains the four questions, or whether that beloved passage is simply the refrain, and the verses are actually the spontaneous questions that the curious children around the table ask when faced with a table full of unusual items. The fact that our Sages argued this point is wonderful, because it is based on yet another question, which is how is it best to pose a question to begin with. More specifically, what is the best way to teach children to ask questions?

Jewish tradition commands us to question continuously, because nothing is as it seems. Everything we see should arouse our curiosity about what is hidden. Just as only one tenth of an iceberg (a favorite image of mine) can be viewed, while the remaining nine tenths remain submerged in the icy depths.

While it is true that the book of Vayikra - and certainly the first five portions in it - are difficult to understand, rather than giving up on them, they are an invitation to question.

People are different from one another, as is evident in the questions they pose. Some ask because they love knowledge. Others ask in order to settle a contradiction they

perceive in the text. Others are bothered or irritated by what they read, and others question because they sense that there are additional layers hidden beneath. There are those who question because they want to help us find answers, etc.

Parashat Vayikra deals with voluntary sacrifices. I, too, choose to make sacrifices, as do we all. This week I wish to sacrifice absolute knowledge. I wish to sacrifice my beloved exclamation point on the altar of longing for the next layer of truth; that which comes from the depths.

So let us begin:

“The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelite people, and say to them: If any of you presents an offering of cattle to the LORD, he shall choose his offering from the herd or from the flock. He shall make his offering a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, for acceptance in his behalf before the LORD. He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, that it may be acceptable in his behalf...”

(Vayikra 1:1-4)

Here are some questions:

Why does the text say “called out” (Vayikra) and not “said”, as is usually the case in the Torah (Vayedabbear)?

Why does it say “if” (you sacrifice) and not “when”? Could this suggest that it is not God who wants our sacrifices?

What does the word “sacrifice” mean? (In Hebrew, its root - ב.ק.ר. - means “near”).

Why an offering from cattle? Does it need to be a farm animal, or would a wild animal also be acceptable?

Why only a male?

What does “without blemish” mean, and why is this important?

“What does “for acceptance” mean? Where does this strange desire to sacrifice come from, and does everyone have such a desire?

And now, to questions that affect us all:

Do I hear when I am called? Always? Definitely? When do I not hear?

What do I sacrifice in my life? For what purpose?

Is it worth it?

Did anyone ask for my sacrifice, or want it?

Do I want it? Actually, what *do* I want. What do I *truly* want?

What is the male quality within myself that I sacrifice?

To whom? Who is the God to whom or for whom I sacrifice?

And... how do we know if our answers are good? Do they have to make sense? Be logical? Follow a particular school of thought?

I have learned over the years that my body lets me know if I have found the answer that is accurate for me at any given moment. It is a feeling of expansion, delicate delight, excitement, satisfaction. There is no guarantee that today's answer will be accurate tomorrow. In fact, chances are that it won't. At that point, I will need to ask again and face new answers rather than make due with yesterday's. And again I will need to sacrifice knowing on the altar of longing for a new, fresh glimpse of the truth waiting in the depths.

Yes, our changing answers reflect our instability, our humanity. But this may be the secret of "Vayikra". From the depths a voice calls us out. The voice may be unclear, but it draws near and we get closer through our questions. In order to hear today's voice, we must let yesterday's go.

Sacrificing stability is worth it, if a new voice is the reward! (Oops - an exclamation point...)

And finally, if we ask a question and an answer does not surface, that, too - i.e., "I don't know" - is also a daring option. And it is okay to ask whether my question is the right one for me at this moment in time. Indeed, when I ask a question, what do I REALLY want to know?

Shabbat Shalom, A Shabbat of fresh answers,

Elisha