

I want to thank Rabbi Michal Shekel for some of the ideas in this Dvar Torah.

When I say, 'dot, dot, dot; dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot,' what does that mean to you? If you said the letters SOS in Morse Code, you would be exactly right. You may also say, 'Are people still using that way to communicate even with all our modern technology?' Or you may even ask, 'What's Morse Code.' This method of sending a series of dots, dashes and spaces across an electromagnetic field has become obsolete because of our modern technological developments.

In many ways we could say the same thing about the much of the book of *Vayikra*, Leviticus which we begin to read today. In our portion we read the laws regarding animal sacrifices. Not only do we not follow these laws anymore but they are extremely difficult to read. We could not imagine taking any of those animals and killing them for the sake of our worshiping God, celebrating a holiday or atoning for our sins. We are truly reading an outdated ancient code.

The very beginning of the portion shows us how different the practices of our ancestors were. The Israelites were told to take an offering from the herd, particularly a male without blemish and bring it to the tent of meeting. The person bringing the sacrifice had to put his hands on the head of the animal to indicate that he was agreeing to sacrifice it to atone for his sins.

Then the priests would slaughter the bull and splash its blood against all four sides of the altar. Then the bull would be cut up and put on the fire. Its head and fat would be burned on the altar. After that its legs and inner organs were washed with water and then they also would be burned.

We are then told that all this was done because the smell was pleasing to Adonai. It's hard to imagine what our senses would absorb if we had been there. I'll spare all of us the very gory details.

We know that this is the way Jews prayed until the fall of the Second Temple when animal sacrifices were no longer used to get God's attention. At that time these laws became obsolete. We really no longer need to know what, when and how to sacrifice. But we also know that we cannot just throw out entire portions of our Holy Torah. We have to find some way to use it. We have always been able to reinterpret the meaning of outmoded laws and the same is true of the laws of sacrifice.

Let's first see what some of our commentators tell us about these laws. *Rambam*, 12th century Spain, thought that they were God's way of transitioning the Israelites away from the animal sacrifice of pagan worship. Many pagan cults sacrificed humans along with animals. But because sacrifice was so prevalent, the Israelites would never have accepted a system that was so different from anything else around them. According to *Rambam*, our system was more restrictive than that of the pagan cults because it was God's plan to eliminate sacrifices completely which is, of course, what eventually happened.

But *Ramban*, 13th century Spain, disagreed with *Rambam*, as he almost always did. He believed that this sacrificial system made some important abstract concepts into concrete realities. When a person who offered the animal to be sacrificed placed his hands on the animal's head, he was consciously transferring his sins to the animal. He wasn't just handing the power of his personal atonement over to the priest who sacrificed the animal for him. According to *Ramban*, the sacrifice was all about the

consciousness of atonement and the animal was merely the concrete symbol of that desire.

At the same time the burning of the different parts of the animal, symbolized the parts of the sinner's body that had committed the sin. Finally the blood that was sprinkled on the altar symbolizes the sinner's blood, which contained the essence of his soul. He was acknowledging that he sinned with his body and with his soul and with this, his repentance was complete.

This ritual according to *Ramban* would literally remove the burden of sin from the shoulders of the person offering the sacrifice.

Both *Rambam* and *Ramban* give us interpretations that help us look at these sacrifices in a more metaphoric rather than literal way.

Let's add another explanation of how these sacrifices relate to our lives today by looking at the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*. It comes from the root *Koof, Resh, Bet* and it means to bring close. At the end of the book of *Shmot/Exodus* we read about the building of the *Mishkan*, the traveling tabernacle in the desert. This entire building was created so that God could dwell among the Israelites, to come close to them, until they had a permanent home in the land of Israel. When we begin the next book, we are told to create another kind of closeness to God by bringing animal sacrifices that we actively participate in. By doing these sacrifices, the Israelites were bringing themselves closer to God.

Today we are not supposed to read this book to learn how to make those daily sacrifices to God. We are supposed to read this book to understand that these sacrifices brought our ancestors closer to God and to devise ways to bring ourselves closer to God. In the *Ashrei* prayer, in the *Koof* verse, we read:

קָרוֹב יי לְכֹל קִרְבָּיו, לְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא, הוּא בְּאֵמֶת.

Adonai draws close to all who draw close to Him, to all who draw close to Him in Truth.

We learn from this verse that God does not keep himself away from us, we keep ourselves away from God. As we study these sacrifices, let's continue to ask ourselves how we can continue to draw close to God and make our lives and those around more and more holy.

Shabbat Shalom.