Vayikra March 20, 2015

Hevrat Shalom Gaithersburg, MD

Tonight is a remarkably special night. Not only is it Shabbat but it is a triple special Shabbat. It is both Shabbat HaChodesh, the Shabbat before the beginning of the month of Nissan that is the month of Pesach, but it’s also Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the month of Nissan tomorrow. Which means if you are strictly reading all of the required Torah portions you need to balance three Torahs.

And astronomically it is also unique. It is the vernal or spring equinox, where the hours of light and dark are balanced equally. 12 of light, 12 of dark. In addition, there is a super-moon, the moon is as close as it gets to us but we can’t see it, because it’s snowing, and because it’s a new moon. But it will be seen in Greenland and Iceland because the new moon is crossing the path of the sun and eclipsing it!

Shabbat, Hahodesh, Rosh Hodesh, Equinox, Super New Moon, Eclipse of the Sun! All on one day!

So if you have been feeling a bit out of balance you can blame it on the confluence of all these calendrical and cosmological occurrences. High tides and low energy and the thought of spring cleaning for Pesach pulling you in all directions.

The news of a world in distress doesn’t help and Israel brings the results of an election that severely challenges the unity of our people worldwide. And what are we reading from Torah tonight? The first parashah in Leviticus, Vayikra, “and He, G-d, called.” Gd is calling us.

Vayikra; the Book of the Torah the Reform movement has largely ignored because of the detailed yet cryptic descriptions of an antiquated and extinct culture that lasted for 2,000 years but has been gone for just as many, detailing the role of the priesthood and the bloody slaughter of innumerable animals for sacrifice as atonement. Isn’t it is ironic that we as modern, liberal Jews have grown *rachok*, distant from the Book of Leviticus, when the word for ritual sacrifice is *korban* from the verb *l’karov*, to draw near.

Just when you might want to turn and hide from a guilty conscience or a traumatic ordeal, Vayikra calls us to come close, confront our challenges, offer up what is precious to us, what is of value, bring our life back into balance. This book shouldn’t even be in here. It’s an owner’s manual for the priesthood. And yet in a revolutionary democratizing move Leviticus is in our Torah, interrupting the flow of the narrative, smack dab in the middle. Offering us a transparency into the ruling leadership of the time, the Cohanim, the priests, and Levite assistants.

The first sacrifice that is mentioned in Vayikra is the *olah* offering. *Olah* comes from the verb *la’a lot*, to go up, rise up, like aliyah when you come up to the Torah, or aliyah, when you move to Israel.

The *olah* sacrifice is of an animal that is completely burned up, entirely consumed, nothing is kept to feed the priests. It is entirely voluntary. It is for something the penitent has done that he feels is very regretful, dangerous, or frightful.

Think of a time in your life when you were in dire straits; a relationship gone very sour, a threat at your work or a crisis in the family, even when you might have been in war. Sometimes a bed in the Emergency room is the altar of an *olah* sacrifice. And you called out for help, Vayikra. You would give anything to pull out of that situation. Anything, maybe even your own life. You are completely consumed by your situation. You are all in, raised up to a higher calling, the outcome is now out of your hands. In these situations we throw ourselves on the mercy of the court, we jump in front of or out of danger, we slam on the brakes, we pray very, very hard, we give very, very generously. We sacrifice. We even use the same word, sacrifice, in order to raise up our pleading, make it sacred, give it more energy, get *karov*, close, to a higher something greater than ourselves. Hoping that the decree will change.

Are we really that much different than our ancestors offering up an *olah* sacrifice to change their fate? Offering something of high value, life itself. After the Destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis comforted our people by saying that prayer replaces sacrifices. The midrash says “Prayer is greater than all sacrifices a person can make.” Prayer replaces sacrifices. Our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel taught, “Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice – it is sacrifice.” Prayer is *as if* we are sacrificing.

There is a wonderful prayer we have, we don’t use it often enough, called the *gomel* prayer, *Birkat hagomel.* It’s specifically for surviving a long journey, an illness, being released from prison, a car accident, or childbirth. But it can be any incidence of escaping peril. It goes like this in a translation by Rabbi Jack Bloom.

*My thanks to You, Bountiful One, Adonai our Gd, Ruler of the Universe, who in Your inscrutable, unknowable way watches over the worthy AND the wayward, my thanks for having graciously done me abundant kindness by shielding me from great harm. Amen*.

There is a sense in the prayer that bad things happen to good and not so good people and that if our crisis has a good outcome a prayer of gratitude is in order. There is the element of dice in there. It could go either way for us. Life is inscrutable, incomprehensible. But just as talk therapy is not always enough if you are not going to change your behavior, prayer may not always do the trick to bring us back into balance. Words must be balanced with deeds.

We Jews tend to be very cerebral but those sacrifices were so physical, so gutsy, so visceral.

Shlepping a bull or wrestling with a ram, up the Temple steps, slaughtering it, stoking a fire, butchering it, cleaning up the whole ordeal Feh!. It’s almost impossible to imagine the enormity of it. In the days immediately after the suspension of the sacrificial cult, in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, the students of Yochanan ben Zakkai grieved that they could no longer offer sacrifices, perform this intensely physical act. Rabbi Yochanan told his students “Do not grieve – we have a means of atonement that is equal to sacrifice: It is doing good deeds, for God teaches us (quoting Hosea 6:6), ‘I desire mercy not sacrifices….’”

It is the revolution of the prophets that changed the sacrificial cult into doing justice. It’s all over the Tanach.

To do justice and judgment is more acceptable to Adonai than sacrifice. Proverbs 21

"The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. Isaiah 1:11

Even when the messiah comes you must finish what you are doing if it is righteous. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai “If you have a sapling in your hand and you hear that Messiah has come, finish planting the tree, then go and inquire.”

Sacrifices were a beginning; a way to convert conscience into action. And that is what perhaps we can learn from this enigmatic book, Vayikra. Gd is calling us to sacrifice. Prayer allows us to hear the voice of our heart. But prayer must move us to offer ourselves, to sacrifice, to act. Try as we might to diminish it, the lessons of the sacrificial system are still with us.

In two weeks we will sit around our dining room tables and celebrate our liberation from slavery, events that happened some 3500 years ago. Sometimes the table is our altar, a shank bone a little memory of the pascal sacrifice on our Seder plate where, with much effort, time, and expense we lift up a meal offering, a *minhah korban*, to get close, *karov* and bond with our family and community.

We will say the timeless words used to present the first fruits on the Temple Mount. *My father was a wandering Aramean. We went down to Egypt with few and became a great and powerful nation but then we were enslaved. We cried out and Gd brought us out with signs and miracles to the land of milk and honey and now I bring You a sacrifice of first fruits.*

Be present for the sacred moments that occur around that table altar and get close, *karov* to a sense of the sacred, the ancient symbols, the cherished history, and watch for the daily sacrifices that inspire us to a holiness that brings us back into balance with ourselves.

Thank you for studying Torah with me tonight.