

Parashat Vayikra 5777, 2017:

*To Come Close to Hashem*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

At the beginning of each book of the Torah, the Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah*, suggests a name that represents the essence of the work. In our case, he calls *Sefer Vayikra*, “*Torat Kohanim v’HaLevi’im*” (“The Laws of the Priests and Levites”). He then proceeds to give us a brief synopsis of some of its essential themes:

Herein all matters of the Ritual Offerings (*Korbanot*) and the proper way in which to guard the purity (*taharah*) of the *Mishkan* (Portable Desert Sanctuary) are to be found. This is the case, since we have already had one *sefer* [i.e. *Sefer Shemot*] that focused upon exile and the redemption therefrom. This work concluded with the topics of the Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Moed = Mishkan*) and the Glory of Hashem with which it was filled. [Thus, it is proper and fitting] that Hashem now commands us concerning the *Korbanot* and various modalities whereby we can guarantee the *taharah* of the *Mishkan*. [This material was presented in order] to ensure that the Ritual Offerings would provide expiation for them [i.e. the Generation of the Desert] – rather than have the sins be a cause to drive away the Divine Presence from their midst. (Translation and additions my own)

Sadly, it has been nearly 2,000 years since the destruction of the Second *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple) and the cessation of the *Korbanot*. Consequently, for many of us, the Ritual Offerings appear to be “foreign” and almost beyond understanding. As such, let us turn to the thought of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), who, in my view,

provides us with one of the most profound analyses for understanding the true meaning of the *Korbanot*:

A *korban* is never used for a present or gift; it is used exclusively with reference to a person's relation to G-d, and can only be understood from the meaning that lies in the root "*krv.*" *Krv* means to approach, to come near, and to enter into a close relationship with someone. This, then, is the underlying idea of the object and purpose of *hakravah* (drawing close), namely, the attainment of a higher sphere of life. (*Commentary On the Torah, Sefer Vayikra 1:2*, translation my own)

The concept of *korban* as the vehicle whereby one obtains "the attainment of a higher sphere of life" is the essence of Rav Hirsch's explanation of our term. The *makriv* (the one who brings the *korban*) has an overwhelming desire to draw near to the Creator, to communicate with Him. From this perspective, the *Korbanot* emerge as a symbolic fulfillment of the celebrated second verse of the *Shema*: "And you shall love the L-rd, your G-d, with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your means." In sum, the goal of a *korban* is to enable "*kirvat Elokim* - nearness to G-d" which, within the Torah's purview, is "the attainment of a higher sphere of life." Indeed, *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) taught us a powerful lesson when he declared: "*kirvat Elokim li tov*" ("Closeness to G-d is what is truly good for me," *Sefer Tehillim 73:28*).

What is *kirvat Elokim*? I believe we can answer this question by examining the expression "*kerov Hashem*" ("Hashem is close") that appears twice in *Sefer Tehillim*:

The L-rd is close to the broken-hearted, and He saves those of crushed spirit. (34:19)  
The L-rd is close to all who call upon Him, to all who will call upon Him in truth (*b'emet*). (145:18, these and all Bible translations, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

These *pasukim* (verses) cite three categories of people that achieve closeness to the Almighty: the broken hearted, those of crushed spirit and those who call upon Him in truth. I believe these groups share at least one characteristic in common, namely, they approach Hashem with the humble recognition that they are totally dependent upon Him. Any sense of arrogance is absent, including an attitude of “*b’kochi v’otzem yadi*” (“My strength and the might of my hand has accumulated this wealth for me,” *Sefer Devarim* 8:17) Instead, it has been replaced by:

We shall thank You and relate Your praise – for our lives, which are committed to Your power and for our souls that are entrusted to You; for Your miracles that are with us every day; and for Your wonders and favors in every season – evening, morning and afternoon. (“*Modim*,” translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: Weekday, Sabbath and Festival*, page 113)

With Hashem’s help and guidance, and our fervent desire, may we recognize our complete dependence upon Him. Then, as if we were actually able to bring *Korbanot*, we will be able draw close to Him by joining those “who call upon Him...who will call upon Him in truth.” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.