

# Sacrifices as Giving

We return to sacrifices this week with the Book of Leviticus, Vayikra. To our modern minds the idea of animal sacrifices is a very difficult one to feel much sympathy with. Even though it is true that we “sacrifice” animals all the time, hidden away in abattoirs far from the eyes of consumers. We are (or should be) more sensitive nowadays to animal cruelty not just in the killing but also in the rearing, transportation and treatment of animals.

Even though the Torah allows for grain, and other non-animal sacrifices the whole of the Temple service seems rooted in a bygone era. There is no way of knowing if this will all, one day, return. We talk about a messianic era but we do not, as Maimonides says, know how it will be in practice. And so, we leave such matters to Elijah!

But then how are we to deal with sacrifices in the Torah and indeed in our prayers when we often talk about the future?

I believe the broad idea of “giving” to God is important, not because God needs our sacrifices or our prayers. But rather because we need to feel we are giving of our best, that we are trying to have a relationship with a higher order and tradition. And as we know good relationships rely on giving more than taking. Sacrificing is giving part of ourselves, imposing limits and disciplines to achieve something higher and better.

The Hebrew for sacrifice is KRBN (Korban) and its root KRB which also gives us the word “to come close.” Whereas a sacrifice in English is often futile, pointless, a waste, in Hebrew it is positive, to help us get closer. And the Hebrew word for love AHVAH shares a root with HVA which means to give or to bring. True love does not depend on what you get as much as what you give. Both ideas come together in the concept of sacrifice in ancient Hebrew.

Once we did it with humans, animals and then gifts. Now we do it by praying, giving up work on Shabbat, by eating differently and trying to live lives of values, spirit and meaning by keeping different rules. Who knows one day it might be through extra sensory communication.

By following an alternative way of life that we double track with civil society and its values. The more we keep of Torah the more we are reminded that we as Jews should have another set of values and a different calendar. We remember that being different can have huge benefits.