

Getting Close to G-d

Category: Tzav, Vayikra

What is this business with sacrifices? Is that really what G-d wants?

The Lotto

Someone approached me this week and asked me to pray for him to win the lottery. He promised to donate a large percentage to the shul. Should I pray for him? Maybe I should just pray for myself to win a lottery...

The story is told of an elderly Jew living in an old age home who would buy a lotto ticket every week and ask his kids to check if he had won. And indeed, one fine day, one of his sons discovers that his father had just won one million dollars!

The kids, of course, were really happy. But at the same time, they were worried about how to break the great news to him—they were afraid that he'd pass out from too much excitement.

So they decided to ask their rabbi. They were sure that the rabbi would find the right way to notify their father of his winnings.

The rabbi was happy to take on this mission, and he went to visit the senior citizen that week as he always did. He opened their conversation with small talk about this and that, and then, in a by-the-way way, he asked the old man: "Tell me: What would you do if they told you that you won one million dollars?"

So the elderly man immediately answered, "Why, Rabbi—I would donate half of it to the synagogue!"

And the rabbi passed out.

But in all seriousness, my friends, this issue begs the question: What is the true purpose of prayer?

If the purpose of prayer is just to ask G-d for what you need, then you only need two minutes. Show up with a short list, tell G-d what you need, and go away!

The story is told about a Jew who showed up one day in a synagogue and happily told the rabbi that he had come just one time to the synagogue and had immediately thereafter won the lotto. So the rabbi asked him, “How can that be? I pray every day and no such miracles happen to me! And here you come just once and G-d answers you right away...?”

So the Jew answered him, “Rabbi, that’s because you’re a nudnik...”

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

Sacrifices or no sacrifices?

In this week’s Parshah, all we read about from beginning to end are the Korbanos, the sacrifices. But when we read the Haftarah, we read the very opposite.

In this week’s Haftarah, the Prophet Jeremiah says in the name of G-d that at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, G-d did not ask of the Jewish Nation to bring sacrifices—but rather, to merely listen to Him. (Yirmiyahu 7:22).

Now, while sacrifices are not mentioned in the Ten Commandments—the Book of Vayikra, known as the “Book of Sacrifices,” mentions sacrifices almost immediately after mentioning the Exodus from Egypt. How can the Prophet say that G-d didn’t ask for sacrifices from them?

Commentators explain that the entire goal of the sacrifices was to aid the Jew in doing teshuvah, in repenting, and getting closer to G-d. When a Jew brings a sacrifice, and he witnesses the kohanim taking the fat and the blood of the animal and burning them on the altar, it’s a very sobering and startling experience. One might even call it shocking—which is exactly the idea. The sacrifices were supposed to shake you, and make you think about life and death, which then leads to the person resetting his priorities in life. And that’s what teshuvah is. So the sacrifices were a teshuvah motivator.

The Ramban (Vayikra 1:9) explains that they are meant “so that a person should think... that he sinned against his G-d... and it would be fitting for his blood to be spilled and his body to be burned if not for the kindness of the Creator, who instead took a substitute.”

So what the Prophet is saying is that sacrifices without teshuvah is something

that G-d didn't ask for—and indeed doesn't want at all.

Instead of Sacrifices

When the Second Temple was destroyed, the Jewish Nation in that era felt that they had lost everything. Until then, every ritual revolved around the Beis Hamikdash—with the Beis Hamikdash destroyed, they didn't know how they could possibly atone for their sins and become close once more to G-d.

Avos D'Rabbi Nasan tells us the following story: “Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai once departed Jerusalem and Rabbi Yehoshua followed him, and he saw the Beis Hamikdash destroyed.”

Rabbi Yehoshua was the closest disciple of Rabbi Yochanan. “Rabbi Yehoshua said, ‘Woe to us over this that it is destroyed! The place at which the sins of Israel were atoned!’ Rabbi Yochanan said to him, ‘My son, do not let it trouble you. We have an atonement that's like it. And which? It is acts of kindness, as the verse states, “For kindness I desired, and not a sacrifice.””

“For so we find with Daniel,” Rabbi Yochanan continued, “who was busy with acts of kindness... and what were the acts of kindness that he was busy with? He would prepare the bride and make her happy, escort the dead, and give a coin to a pauper, and pray three times a day, and his prayer was willingly accepted.”

This reflected the general approach of the Sages of his era. When the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, Jews could no longer physically bring sacrifices, because the physical temple was destroyed. But the Sages didn't give up, and they perpetuated the concept of the sacrifices spiritually, expressing it through several mitzvos.

One such mitzvah, perhaps the most famous one, is tzedakah: charity. Tzedakah is the the same concept as a sacrifice. A person worked for his money and invested blood and sweat, and instead of using that money to buy food for himself and his family, he instead chooses to donate it to charity. In other words, he is sacrificing his very fat and blood to G-d.

Hosting guests is another spiritual form of sacrifice. The Talmud (Tractate Menachos 97a) tells us that “when the Beis Hamikdash stood, the altar would

atone for a person—but now that the Beis Hamikdash no longer endures, a person's table atones for him." Why? "Because he gives a piece of bread to guests"— meaning that when a person invites guests and feeds them at his table, it's considered a sacrifice in G-d's Eyes.

Another form of sacrifice today is fasting. The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 17a) says, "when the Beis Hamikdash stood, a person would sin and bring a sacrifice, and they would not bring of it but its fat and blood and it would atone for him. And now, I sat in fasting and lessened my fat and blood; may it be Your Will before You that my lessened fat and blood be as if I sacrificed them before You."

In other words, by fasting, a person sacrifices a bit of his fat and blood for the sake of heaven, and that's considered a sacrifice. The Rebbe explains that it doesn't even need to be a full day's fast. If a person delays his lunch by one hour, that's also a sacrifice and is also considered a korban.

This brings us back to our opening topic: Prayer—which is also a form of sacrifice. This is because there is another interpretation to the word "korban," which can mean not just "sacrifice" but also "a drawing-close." The entire goal of the korban was to get close to G-d. How does one get close to G-d? The Sages say, "The prayers were established corresponding to the regular sacrifices" (Talmud, Tractate Brachos 26b).

The goal of prayer is not just to ask G-d to win the Lotto. The inner goal of prayer is to be in G-d's Presence.

When a person goes on vacation with his family, he doesn't go to get something specific from them; he goes for the simple reason of being together with them. (It's like Chasidim who travel to their Rebbe—not just to get the Rebbe's blessing for their needs but simply to be in the Rebbe's presence, the greatest pleasure they could have.)

The same is true of prayer—it's an opportunity to get close to G-d. And that's what a korban is.

But the most important korban that a Jew can bring to G-d nowadays isn't just bringing himself or herself closer to G-d, but bringing another Jew closer to G-d—to bring another Jew to shul, or to invite another Jew to the seder. These are the sacrifices that bring about "a pleasant scent unto G-d," "a spirit of

contentment before Me”—because these are the things that bring G-d true nachas.