

VAYIKRA – THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

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One of the things that I have discovered over the past several days when I've done daily inspirations and when I've taught classes and so on is that people tell me that I'm not smiling, and I just want to say they're worried about that—the reason I realized that I wasn't smiling was because after all most of the time when I speak I'm looking at you, and you make me smile, but these days I'm looking at me and I don't make myself smile. When I look in the mirror in the morning, the first thing I do is not smile, so I have to remember now and put in my imagination that in fact I am talking to you. And in any case that is what I hope you will feel as well that I'm talking to you despite the fact that of course when I look at the screen, I'm talking to me. However, I remember my professor, Simon Greenberg, who said that the best sermons are delivered to yourself. I don't think he meant it quite this literally, but for now it will have to do.

So what I want to talk about today is the beginning of the book of Vayikra which is about sacrifice, and you may or may not know that children when they were first initiated into Jewish study would begin with the book of Vayikra, and that's because the rabbi said that as sacrifices are pure and children are pure, there is a match between the two. I want to say something slightly different about sacrifices, which is children to represent sacrifice in one sense because of course, for many of us what we think of as what we sacrifice is for our children. And that's part of the reason that we are so attached to them: because somebody that you give to paradoxically is also somebody that you feel tied to. Part of the purpose of sacrifice is not actually to alienate you from somebody, but to draw you closer to them. I've had the opportunity many times of seeing when members help other members, they feel closer to the people that they help, because now

there's a tie and that's why in Hebrew sacrifice is *korbanot* from the root *karib*: to draw close. Because when you help someone you feel closer to them this is a strange concept to think about in some ways right now because we are sacrificing so much, and we are sacrificing it in part to help ourselves.

People who I see who are wearing masks in the market or people who are isolating at home are generally doing it—generally—to protect their own health so that they don't get sick. But I realize that there is also an element of societal sacrifice and familial sacrifice in this. We also do this because we don't want to spread pandemic to other people, because we want those around us to be ok, because we want the social order to hold together, and all of that is part of sacrifice just like the sacrifice that we do for ourselves. And you can see this in the people who are sacrificing the most right now, which are the people who are on the front lines: the doctors, the health care, workers the nurses. All of those who are doing the most that they can to ensure that those who are sick will be healed, and those who are well will stay well. I have heard stories, I don't know if you have as well, of doctors in China and doctors here who have literally sacrificed to their lives; who have gotten sick and some of them, unfortunately, did not recover because they insisted on being there when people needed them. Sacrifice this sense is a drawing close, not a separation. It's a *korban*. It's a way of saying, “I offer this to you because I care about you. Because I care about those who you care about.”

Nobody knows how long this will go long. We can't know right now there are speculations every single day from different people in different ways, but we do know they've in all sorts of ways it will call for different kinds of sacrifice. There are sacrifices that are sensible and reasonable and important, and then there are others that we will shy away from and I think we do not need to make in order to sustain ourselves as individuals and as a society. That's part

of what Vayikra is really about. Most of the animals that were brought to the temple were brought there in order for people to be able to feed the priests to sustain the ritual that was central to ancient Israel's life. In the same way, we're making sacrifices in order to sustain the social life that draws us all together. It is a time I hope where we learn some things from the sacrifices we're making. Some people by staying home are enabling themselves to learn and read and grow and watch and talk and meditate and do all sorts of things that they would not be able to do in the normal course of life. Others are reaching out to those who feel lonely or alone and sacrificing their time and their effort so that others will not feel that they've been abandoned. Through all of this, we do have the potential to turn it from a sacrifice into a *korban*—from something that you just give up to something that draws you close.

I know, those of you who are now on this call, this video, this combination Zoom-YouTube magic that we're working, that some of you see that at the beginning of this there was no audio, then there was no visual, then there was no visual-audio, then there was no listening-seeing... But the reason we do all this is because we're trying to stay close, and even though we can't do it in the normal way, we'll do it any way we can. So remember the *korban*: that we are sacrificing for each other so that we can stay with each other. And at the end of this, God willing, just like the *korbanot*, just like the sacrifices in the temple, we will celebrate a hag, a festival. A celebration of coming together again. So stay safe, stay strong, and *shabbat shalom*.