



**The Sacrifice of a Care Giver:**  
**Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayikra* (Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26)**  
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This week's portion of VaYikra introduces a challenging text for contemporary readers. It includes various instructions on how to approach God by means of sacrificial offerings. It lists types of sacrifices (animals, grains and flour), in what circumstances they are to be brought to God (for private and communal repentance; to help atone for dishonesty or for guilt), and many details about the process of sacrifice. To many of us, these types of rituals not only seem technical and unfamiliar, but even irrelevant and distasteful.

Some of our sages struggled with the underlying meaning of the sacrificial rituals and provided some logical explanations for them. As an example, Nahmanides (13<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and scholar from Spain) saw the sacrifices as a means of offering oneself to God and a way of keeping the community sufficiently pure, so that the divine presence could dwell among the people. Rabbenu Bahya (13<sup>th</sup> century, Spain) saw the sacrifices as being a vehicle for the moral growth of humanity. And Émile Durkheim, the non-Jewish French sociologist noted that sacrifice not only bonded the members of a social group, but acted to make the group aware of its common identity, and thus, affirmed the group's solidarity.

Even though modern Jews do not offer sacrifices as a means of worship the way our ancestors did, the reality is that we still participate in sacrificial rituals in different forms. For example, we make sacrifices for our children's education because their education is valuable to us. Or, we sacrifice for our families' economic security because our families are important to us. We are taught that when we are challenged to give away our pleasures, or when we are forced out of our comfort zones, we make a sacrifice. In this way, sacrifice is often seen as an obstacle to self expression and emotional independence. We perceive that in order for us to get what we really want, we are required to give up something valuable.

Another form of sacrifice in our days can be seen in the realm of health issues, disability and suffering. Among them is the care giver, who may invest a tremendous amount of resources, time, energy, and emotion in the care of a loved one. This kind of sacrifice often involves giving up something from the self. In order to provide support for one another, it can be important for the care giver and the ill person construct an additional frame of meaning to their hard work. Our Parasha offers us some tools for this, and it begins with the way we translate the word sacrifice. The word sacrifice in Hebrew is *korban*, which is derived from the root *K-R-B* meaning "drawing-near" or "to come close". Our ancestors understood that when they brought their sacrifices (*korbanot*) they also brought themselves closer to God. For example, when they sacrificed in order to confess their sins and admit their guilt, they were going thru an emotional process of a spiritual cleansing, and as a result they could make the connection with the Divine and feel close to God. In this way, the sacrificial action would not necessarily have been a burden; rather it was an anticipated, uplifting event.

We often hear how detached and alienated people feel when they face illness or go through medical treatment. What could be more holy than coming closer to them by being with them? To show them that we care, to let them feel our presence? Care giving is not only about getting closer to the person who is ill, but it is also about getting closer to God. Since all of us were created in the image of God, anytime we attend to our loved one, we also attend to God. When we connect on this level of compassion, we elevate ourselves to a divine level. It is as if we bring our sacrifices of love, strength and resources to the holy altar. And just like a sacrificial item that could be smelled, touched and felt, so it is when we care for the ill – they can smell us, they can feel our touch and hear the music or the silences within our voices.

To get closer to God also required pure intention and sincerity from the heart. Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi tells us that God did not cherish so much the physical offerings of the one who came with animals or grain, but rather those sacrifices that came from the person's heart. If the mind of the worshiper was not focused on the intent of the sacrifice, the ritual lost its effectiveness. For example, if the sacrifice was brought to atone for some inadvertent sin, the individual had to keep in mind the remorse for what he had done. When our ancestors brought an animal for sacrifice it was as if they in fact sacrificed something of themselves to God, and what counted was the effort they had put into the sacrifice. Furthermore, when they brought the *olah* (burned offering) and let it totally be consumed by fire, they may have experienced, in the view of contemporary Rabbi Shefa Gold, their complete surrender of self to God's will. They let go of self and felt closer to God. Similarly, when we care for our loved ones with an act of *hesed* (loving kindness), we indeed offer ourselves with our hearts and with a sense of surrender.

If we read closely the instructions of Parashat VaYikra we can see ways in which care givers can redeem what is felt to be broken within themselves. We may transform a burden to a holy gift giving when the meaning of care giving is elevated and sanctified. Our sacrifice may become a sacrifice of love, which opens us up to enter the world of the Divine. As such, the actions, the intentions and the willingness of the care giver become consumed with the sacred flames of their loved ones. And when we give care with compassion to our loved ones, we also echo our sages who tell us that by our offerings we create a whole infrastructure of morality and solidarity for our personal relations and for the whole Jewish community at large.

May we all be blessed with courage and faith to enter and endure the process of coming closer to our loved ones who are in need of our love and healing. Amen!

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