

My journey of drashot comes to Vayikra.

The High Holidays. They're like a trip around the world. It's an opportunity to visit sites long canonized and also those I just read about in the the Sunday Times. There's no shortage of topics. The world is wide open.

Bereishit, Genesis. I'm safely back home. Or so I think – because then I'm off on a roller coaster ride through the beginning of the canon itself. Through the moral quandaries of humanity's original relationships. Relationships long revered but requiring a response to the ferment of mind and time. Genesis – it's an unsettling, multi-sensory ride. As much as there is to say about humanity, there's as much to say about Bereishit.

Sh'mot, Exodus. Though it's a tumultuous narrative, I find it rather soothing as a darshan. God decides to be very present for my people, the Jewish people -- with the covenant at Sinai and the building of the mishkan. I feel that commitment and begin to explore its mutuality. In law, spirit and action. The field of discussion narrows from all humanity to our lives as Israelites and Jews.

And then comes Vayikra. Leviticus. At first glance, there's no narrative to travel – just the endless, dry landscape of sacrifices, the Biblical form of worship that so radically differs from how we worship God today. Building a sanctuary for God to dwell in, the focus of the end of Shmot, is a noble enterprise whose beauty, precision, and mission – we can identify with. We do the same today in our Jewish lives, as I spoke about last week.

But animal sacrifices? Vayikra can make for a profound moment of disconnect between the modern Jew and our Jewish identity, threatening the relationship nurtured in the book of Sh'mot.

It's my job to help keep you connected, continually moving up the ladder of the tradition. And it is precisely Vayikra, fraught with the danger of our disconnection, which teaches us how to do the opposite.

Engaging Vayikra, it's critical we internalize what sacrifices meant to the ancient Israelites. The Israelites took the best of their flock and their herds – their most valuable individual economic assets – and transformed them into vehicles for worshipping God. Economic sacrifice was at the heart of the ancient Israelites' worship. We can only imagine the emotional intensity this generated for the sacrificial moment. I'm surrounded by the sweet smell of the burnt offering, the smoke rising to the heavens. My investment, my sweat and toil, are pleasing God.

And this worship, the sacrificial cult of the tabernacle, was the heart that made the rest of Israelite society beat. And so it was with the Beit Hamikdash, the Temples in Jerusalem, the successors to the mishkan. The investment demanded of the Israelites was significant but clear, as was their spiritual payoff.

Only after the Temples were destroyed and Judaism was reborn in its rabbinic form was the Israelites' economic sacrifice distributed more broadly across the three pillars of rabbinic tradition – prayer, study and acts of chesed. With the disappearance of the sacrificial system, the spiritual rewards of our investment in worship lost their sensory form and became shrouded in the mystery of prayer, as they remain today.

Yet the more we think about Vayikra, however, the easier will be our efforts to feel God's immediate presence. Our sounds, our movements, the kavana that emerges from our house of prayer, they also go straight to the heavens. And we should visualize it if we need to, standing in sandals of the ancients.

Reality being what it is, it is hard to pinpoint the rewards of modern worship, Jewish prayer.. The content offers many challenges, both theologically and linguistically. It's easy to jump ship before even beginning the journey.

How do we stay the course – and how do we ultimately reap the rewards of prayer? By giving up things that are valuable to us, just like the ancients did in their worship. Without skin in the game, we are not going to feel the rewards.

Tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm not sure if this is in our calculus, at least for most of us.

We follow the lead of B'nai Yisrael by contributing funds in the form of membership to maintain the synagogue just as B'nai Yisrael contributed gold, silver and other materials to the building of the mishkan.

But what's parallel to giving up the best of our flocks or herds to worship God? What do we give up to worship God?

I don't have *the* answer, only some possible answers:

1. Time. Our time is certainly valuable. Prayer takes time. To learn, to understand, to prepare, to settle with it, to reflect on the beliefs expressed within. Time decisively chosen to be in this service, rather than in the other services of our lives. Important services where we may feel more tangible results – as parents doing homework with our kids, as providers paying our bills, or as volunteers doing community service. Communal prayer is service as well – not only to God, but for ourselves, our kids and our community.
2. Individual choice. When we choose to pray in community, we make a commitment to community. We are there to support others in their prayer experience as much as we there to benefit our own religious lives.
3. Money. The end of Exodus highlights the notion of *hiddur mitzvah* in prayer, the beautification of a mitzvah. We beautify the mitzvah of our worship by doing everything from maintaining our sifrei torah to paying a rabbi to celebrating our worship with Kiddush lunch following to creating new stimuli that will foster a love of shul in our children. These items all take funds, typically well beyond what our membership sustains. I have dreams, we all have dreams for our shul. If we want them.
4. Our hearts and minds. It's quite paradoxical, that a main focus of our day of rest requires a great deal of applied energy. As Jews, we *rest* by applying our souls to the worship of God and to the understanding of our national narrative. We *relax* when we go home and take our Shabbat naps.
5. Control. The prayer experience is not something we can control, to be just as we want it. It's dependent on others as well, and its rewards are inconsistent. Prayer a statement of faith in a higher power who provides that ultimate order and meaning to the world.

What are your thoughts about what sacrifices we make to worship God? Or those that we need to make?

With the investment comes the rewards, beyond the experience of God's presence. Participating in communal prayer, we are rewarded manifold. With companionship and safety in a world of isolation and uncertainty. Affirmation and appreciation of our importance as members of a community. The freedom to think and reflect free of the distractions and competitions which dominate the rest of our lives. The comfort of traditional folkways in a world where everything is always changing.

At first glance, Vayikra certainly poses a challenge to our embrace of Jewish identity, which the first two books of the Torah systematically nurture. Animal sacrifice is not our way to worship. But sacrifice is our way to worship. Without sacrifice, we cannot meaningfully engage in our worship, the discipline of our prayer, nor reap its immense rewards. Stepping into the sandals of the ancients, we learn about sacrifice, and we imagine just how rewarding worship can be.