

Shlomo Riskin

TORAH LIGHTS

VAYIKRA: SACRIFICE, SANCTITY AND SILENCE

Maggid Books

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Vayikra: Sacrifice, Sanctity and Silence

First Edition 2009

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06676-8531, USA
POB 2455, London W1A 5WY, England
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 91040, Israel
www.korenpub.com

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Cover Painting © Shalom of Safed, *Moses Announcing the Holidays*

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ISBN 978 159264 274 8, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Typeset by KPS

Printed in Israel

To our beloved children

Batya and Eddie
Yosef, Mevasseret, Naomi and Akiva

Elana and Menachem
Avishai, Amiel and Elai HaKohanim

Hillel and Limor
Eden Barkai and Yaal David HaKohanim

Yoni and Limor
Shalev Hod Harel and Maayan Ivri HaKohanim
Nehora Yafit and Shoham Ahava

In the hope that they receive from us
a fraction of what I received
from my parents and grandparents

In profound gratitude
to my beloved friend

BERNARD GOLDBERG

for having sponsored this edition
of Biblical Commentary
to honor his mother

ELSIE GOLDBERG

Who has graced the world
for well over a century of years

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Tribute

I want to thank my revered teachers, Rabbi Joseph B. Halevi Soloveitchik, z”l, Prof. Nehama Leibowitz, z”l and Rabbi Moshe Besdin, z”l for their many insights into the words and commentaries of the Torah. Much of what is written here is based upon lectures and discussions I was privileged to have had with them – as well as with many great Torah scholars from whom I have learned throughout the years. Although I have attempted to give proper attribution so as to help bring redemption to the world, I am certain that there are insights I may have derived from others which I have come to think of as my own; suffice it to say that whatever may be worthy in this volume was derived from my teachers, but I assume complete responsibility for whatever may not be deemed worthy.

I am most appreciative to Sheldon Gewirtz, who originally urged me to begin writing a weekly commentary on the Torah portion, and to Jacob Lampert, who helped in the writing of the columns during the early years of this activity. The congregations I have been privileged to serve as rabbi and preacher, Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan and the many synagogues of the City of Efrat, Israel, as well as my students at the Ohr Torah Stone Institutions served as the original sounding boards for

Tribute

these commentaries, which were then written and distributed in weekly columns for *The Jerusalem Post* and additionally in some thirty Anglo-Jewish newspapers worldwide. Hopefully, each additional rendering has helped improve my formulation and understanding.

My beloved family and extended family – and especially my cherished wife and life-partner, Vicky – have not only heard these ideas around the Sabbath table, but have also questioned them, argued with them and certainly refined them.

Most of all, I must give tribute to the Almighty, who has enabled me to labor in the vineyard of Torah during these last forty years as rabbi and educator, a calling which has made the Five Books of the Torah my constant guide and companion.

כִּי אִם בְּתוֹרַת ה' חִפְצוֹ וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵה

Introduction to Vayikra

This third book of the Bible, Vayikra (from the opening Hebrew word “*And [God] called to Moses from the Tent of Meeting*”) or Leviticus (Latin for “pertaining to the Levites,” the descendants of the tribe of Levi who served as priests and ministers of the holy Temple), is called the Book of the Holy (*Sefer haKedusha*) by the Talmudic sages.

The expressions of holiness which we find throughout this book is a far cry from Rudolf Otto’s *Idea of the Holy* and its concentration upon the mystical and other-worldly awe-some and awe-ful “numinous”; the biblical concept of the sacred is much more down – to – earth, revealing a human “rendezvous with the divine” from within the context of Sabbath and festival familial celebrations (sanctity of time), from the experience of serving, communicating with and sacrificing to the divine in special centers of Sanctuary, Temple and synagogue (sanctity of space), but especially from our daily interactions with our fellow human beings – our spouses, our children, our neighbors and the strangers in our midst – from the actions and words which unify and ennoble personal relationships (sanctity of the human being). Holiness in the Bible is not so much leaving this world to reach out for the divine up there

Introduction to Vayikra

as it is our challenge to bring God into our every-day life down here, to re-make this world into a fitting place for His presence.

This third biblical book also deals with sacrifice – including the ultimate sacrifice unto death for an ideal, for a God, for a national future. And I must add that from a personal perspective the most difficult and even agonizing aspect of my rabbinate in Efrat is attempting to comfort parents whose children have lost their lives in defense of our homeland, in terrorist attacks. Nothing is as painful as a parent burying a child. Here too this book of the Bible provides direction and even comfort – especially in its confirmation of the human need to express emotion and even anger and in its acceptance of the necessity of silence in order to retain our often difficult relationship with the divine. Sanctity, sacrifice and silence are indeed the hall-mark of this most profound and relevant book of Vayikra, the call of the divine to His children on earth.

Vayikra

When God Calls Twice: Two Separate Expressions of Summoning

*And God called to Moses and He spoke to him
from the Tent of Meeting saying...*

LEVITICUS 1:1

The portion of *Vayikra* opens with two separate expressions of “summoning” – “And God *called* to Moses and he *spoke* to him.” Why are there two distinct expressions, to call and to speak? Perhaps one may suggest that this parallels the divine repetition of Moses’ name at the burning bush, when the Almighty cries out “Moses, Moses” which the Midrash usually explains as being a repetition of affection. When I look back however upon my own early years, whenever one of my parents called my name twice (at that time it was “Steven, Steven”), it generally meant that I was in trouble for something I had done that was not particularly appreciated by the older generation. Why do we therefore assume that in this case of Moses the repetition reflects affection rather than anger?

The truth is that the Midrash in the beginning of this Torah

portion presents another explanation. At the end of the book of Exodus, the Torah describes a cloud which descended upon the Tent of Meeting, a cloud which symbolized the Divine Presence. The Torah likewise insists that no one – not even Moses – could enter this divine cloud without being especially invited by God to do so. Hence, suggests the Midrash, God had to call out to Moses to permit him to enter the cloud, after which God spoke and communicated a specific message.

This explanation not only interprets the repetition of the divine summons but also provides a most profound and magnificent symbolism expressing the divine challenge to humanity. The Almighty appears as a cloud; we apprehend Him only “through a glass darkly.” Perhaps the reason why our God has neither shape nor form and is not clearly defined in any physical way is in order to teach that those who follow such a God must be prepared to chart new territories and to enter undefined areas. Our God created a world which contains chaos so that we can make order of it and He formed that world with evil so that we may perfect it in the Kingship of God. We must enter the nebulous and the unknown and bring God’s presence into areas in which He is not yet manifest. Egypt was a clearly defined society with a specific caste system of masters and slaves, lordly Pharaohs and abject subjects. We followed an unknowable God into an unknown desert in order to bring out His divine word (*dibbur*) into the arid wasteland (*midbar*).

A voice called out in the desert: prepare a place for the Lord, make a straight pathway in the desert for our God.

Isaiah 40:3

And so does the prophet Jeremiah praise Israel:

I remember the lovingkindness when you were young, the love of your youth; you walked after me in the desert, in a land which was not yet seeded.

Jeremiah 2:2

This is the ultimate challenge of the true person of faith: To enter unknown terrain and to bring the divine message of ethical and moral monotheism

to a world that does not yet know it. This is the ultimate challenge of our life in Israel, filled as it is with uncertainty and danger. Israel the people, from the backdrop of Israel the land, must sanctify Jerusalem and proclaim from the holy Temple the message of world peace and human justice.

What gives the individual the strength and the courage to walk with God into the unknown and even to make a place for the Almighty in a wilderness? Perhaps if an individual really feels that he is being summoned by God, that he has a divine vocation – that he is being called by God to the extent that he feels a “calling” – then he goes forward into the cloud unafraid.

Given this understanding, I believe we have an even deeper insight into why Moses is summoned twice and why God repeats his name “Moses, Moses.” The Midrash teaches us that every individual has a double image: He/She is the person that he/she is but is also the person whose image is imprinted in the divine Chariot (*merkava*) in the highest heavenly sphere. This double human identity is even given expression in two very similar blessings which we recite at weddings under the nuptial canopy. One blessing reads:

Blessed are you, the Lord our God, who creates the human being.

The second blessing reads

Blessed are you, O Lord, who has created the human being in His image, and in the image of the shape of His form has He fashioned him as an eternal building. Blessed are you, O God, who creates the human being.

These two blessings are two aspects of every individual. First, each of us is born at a specific time in a specific place to a specific set of parents with a specific physical build and appearance, slated to live for a specific number of years. Second, each of us as a member of a historic nation, has a collective memory which extends backwards to Sinai and the Garden of Eden, as well as collective anticipation which extends forward to the messianic age. It is this second aspect of our personality which links us to eternity and enables us to transcend our specific time and place.

God summons Moses twice and calls out at the burning bush “Moses, Moses” because there are in reality two Moseses: the first person, Moses of Egypt, was a prince in Pharaoh’s court and fell in love with the Midianite Tzipporah; the second person, Moses, spoke to God and sacrificed all of his princely comforts to link his destiny with his people and their redemption. In so far as the first aspect of our transient personality is joined to the second aspect of our transcendent personality we will have the capacity to meet God in the haziness of the nebulous cloud of the unknown. God calls Moses twice because it is the second Moses who has the courage to face uncertainty and, because of that, he has gained eternity.