

## **D'var Torah: Parashat Vayikra**

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, March 13, 2019

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**This week the Chief Rabbi explains how his experience as a ‘Shochet’ compares to the experience of offering sacrifices in the Beit HaMikdash.**

Why was one of our main sacrifices called ‘Olah’?

Like ‘olah’ or ‘aliyah’ it means ‘going up’, but it is usually translated as ‘a burnt offering’. In parashat Vayikara we are given all the details of the olah. The Midrash Tanchuma tells us that it is known by this name because it is a voluntary offering, and therefore it is superior to all other offerings. Rashi, however, says that since the olah was a burnt offering and the smoke went up to heaven, that is why it is called an olah. The Ramban says that the olah is given to atone for sins which rise up into our minds, tempting us to do what we otherwise would not. Later on, when we regret it, and we bring the sacrifice.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch tells us that the term olah does not relate to the animal or the process, but rather through the person who brings the sacrifice - one becomes elevated through the experience of bringing this sacrifice. I believe that all of these *perushim* enable us to understand the essence of all sacrifices.

Sacrifices in temple times provided us with an opportunity to volunteer, to come forward, to engage in ‘korban’, from the word ‘karov’ (close), whereby we became closer to the Almighty. It was through the korban that we established that connection between ourselves and Heaven. It was through the korban that we were able to atone for our sins and to make ourselves into better people. The person bringing the korban witnessed the slaughtering of an animal and that had a deep effect on him.

I recall from the time when I was training to be a shochet and when I shechted animals in the abattoir, in addition of course, to contemplating the mortality of the animal, I would think about my own mortality. Thank God I am alive, but who knows for how long! It’s all in the hands of God. I always emerged from those experiences thinking about how I should utilise every precious moment of life for sacred purposes. That was the essence of the korban – it was a most dramatic experience through which a person came closer to Hashem and resolved to improve their ways.

In our times, without a temple, it is tefilla (prayer) which takes the place of the korban. Similarly, through our tefillot we step forward to engage with Hashem and connect with Heaven. We have an opportunity to atone for our errors and most importantly of all, we can elevate ourselves through tefillah, to become better people, to shape a better world for the sake of our future.

Shabbat Shalom

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