

Of the books of the Torah, ספר ויקרא has historically been the least understood. The opening portions of ויקרא deal with the laws of sacrifices. Many Jews understood these Parshiot to mean that bringing a sacrifice alone atoned for an immoral and unethical life style. Various prophets castigated the people for their lack of adherence to Mitzvot and a misplaced reliance on sacrifices for religious affirmation. Jeremiah in particular preached against this perversion prior to the destruction of the Holy Temple. He said that sacrifices are not the focal point of how man is to rendezvous with Gd. The mission of the Jew is to live a moral and ethical life focused on respect, charity, appropriate relationships, distinguishing between the holy, the mundane and the profane. Sacrifices should be brought by a Jew who exemplifies an ethical and religious life when he seeks to complete his connection with Gd. We must view ספר ויקרא in its entirety, as a single unit. The latter part of ויקרא discusses moral and ethical concepts like forbidden foods and relationships. It contains lofty ethical and philosophical principles like “The world belongs to Me, for you are sojourners and temporary dwellers with Me” (25:23). Unfortunately the latter half of the book was ignored or never understood properly, as the Jewish People only saw the first two Parshiot that focused on sacrifices.

Besides the lack of appreciation and understanding on the part of Knesset Yisrael, ספר ויקרא has been derided and held in contempt by the nations of the world and other religions. From the time of the Hasmoneans and the Greek Hellenizers, ספר ויקרא has been attacked mercilessly for the institution of Sacrifices it contains. The Gmara (Sukkah 56b) tells the story of Miriam Bas Bilga who converted and married a Greek officer who entered the Temple and removed her shoe and banged it on the altar exclaiming “wolf, wolf, how long will you consume the material wealth of the Jewish People while you do not protect them in their time of need”. The early Christians sought to attack the institution of the Temple and took aim at the Kohanim and the Temple service. Anyone familiar with the history of the period knows how deep their hatred ran towards תורת כהנים, the Book of Leviticus, a hatred that intensified during the middle ages with the rise of Christianity. It continued through the Jewish reform period that started in the 18th century continuing to current times. These attempts consistently sought to deride and belittle the institution of Sacrifices. Indeed, one of the earliest reforms enacted by Reform Judaism was the excision of Korbanos from daily prayer. Throughout the years the form of derision has changed but the intent remains the same. Modern bible criticism is a veiled atheistic and agnostic attempt to perpetuate the Christian attack against Toras Kohanim. The use of the term “Priest Code” is a thinly veiled attempt to discredit ספר ויקרא. These groups attempted to brand ספר ויקרא as a subsequent addition to the Canon, written by a group of Priests after the return to Zion from the Babylonian exile in order to force a priestly aristocracy on the people.

Knesset Yisrael remained faithful and true to our Mesorah. We have remained steadfast in defense of תורת כהנים, rising to defend against each attempt to discredit it. With each attempt at derision, we displayed more devotion and commitment to its

study. Indeed, because of this derision, Knesset Yisrael has shown more devotion and greater creativity to ספר ויקרא than the other books of the Torah, as expressed by all the books and commentary that have been written on ספר ויקרא. Talmud Bavli for סדר זרעים includes only מסכת ברכות, as the other Tractates related to agriculture only applied in Eretz Yisrael and were therefore more fully covered in the Jerusalem Talmud. Similarly, מסכת נדה is the only volume in סדר טהרות בבלי, with the rest limited to Mishnayos. When it comes to סדר קדשים, Talmud Bavli contains a full set of tractates matching the Talmud Yerushalmi. Our devotion to סדר קדשים, even in exile, is also evident by the fact that of all the Midrash books written on the Torah, only ספרא דבי רב, referred to as תורת כהנים, was written in Babylonia. Rashi and Tosfos, the classical commentaries on Talmud Bavli are not available for משניות טהרות וזרעים. However Rashi and Tosfos commentaries on the tractates in סדר קדשים are as extensive as those on סדר נשים or סדר מועד. We include איזהו מקומן and Mishnayos from סדר זרעים in our daily prayers to reinforce the ideas of Sacrificial service in our daily lives. We include the opening section of תורת כהנים, the ברייתא of Rabbi Yishmael and the thirteen attributes through which the Torah is explicated, in our daily קרבנות recitation to reinforce the inherent connection between תורה שבכתב and תורה שבעל פה regarding קרבנות.

According to one opinion in the Gmara (Brachos 26b), our daily prayers are directly connected to the daily sacrifices offered at the same time of the day. According to Tosfos, our תפלת מוסף is a form of נשלמה פרים שפתינו, where our Tefilot are substitutes for the specific sacrifices offered. On Yom Kippur, the עבודה, the recitation of the order of the קרבנות היום, the sacrifices offered during the day, is the central motif of the day. According to Rabbeinu Hai Gaon, there was a tradition to recite the עבודה in Shacharis, Mussaf and Mincha on Yom Kippur because it was so beloved. The Midrash Rabbah quotes an ancient tradition that the education of young children commenced with the study of ספר ויקרא. Gd said that let those that are pure and holy study the Torah portion devoted to purity and sanctity.

With this basis, perhaps we can better understand the Gmara (Brachos 18a) regarding Bnayahu Ben Yehoyada. The Talmud quotes (Samuel 2, 23:20) that he performed mighty deeds, he smote the two mighty men of Moab; he went down and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in the time of snow. What was special about Bnayahu? The Gmara interprets the latter part of the statement to mean that he studied תורת כהנים on a cold winter day. He was willing to study תורת כהנים and to defend it against the mighty nations like Moab that heaped scorn on our tradition and our adherence to the laws of תורת כהנים. He recognized that we must defend תורת כהנים no matter how dark and cold the exile environment we find ourselves in, without regard to how absurd it seems to all those around us and how we may be scorned for our devotion to it.

Chazal exhibited similar devotion to תורת כהנים. After the destruction of the second Temple, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakai enacted many Takanot to keep the Temple and the עבודה alive in our communal memory. He and others were able to see a future of

עבודת בית המקדש, at a time when few would listen to them, despite the seeming absurdity of hoping for such a future. Bnayahu and Rabban Yochanan were willing to look forward because they had the courage to learn and teach תורת כהנים in such a dark and foreboding time.

The complete understanding of תורת כהנים requires adherence and acceptance to both parts of the ספר, book. For that, the people needed to be educated not only about the aspects of sacrifices in ספר ויקרא, but also about the ethical and moral conduct the book required of the people. That was the responsibility of the Priests. They are responsible for teaching and enforcing the written and oral law, the complete ספר ויקרא. Various prophets rebuked the Priests for their sins and misdeeds because they abused the trust and responsibility they were given. The Priests did not embrace the dual aspects of their job: Temple service and teaching and judging the people. The prophets recognized that in the second Temple the Priests would have to embrace their complete role. Ezekiel suggested an alternate program for the Priests that emphasized teaching the people in addition to their role in the Temple. Ezekiel admonished them to embrace the additional roles to teach the people right from wrong, to distinguish between defiled and pure, to serve as judges, to resolve disputes and maintain social harmony, to teach them the laws of the Sabbath. These were the foundations the prophets urged the Priests to adopt so they could adapt to their intended roles. The prophets went so far as to say that one need not be a Levite to join their mission and be considered a Priest. As Malachi said, ושפתי כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה יבקשו מפייהו. The desire to teach and be the source of Torah knowledge was of paramount importance. Indeed, the scholars ensured the survival of the Oral and written law. They became the leaders of the Second Temple era. They acted as the Priests that ensured the continuity of Jewish life over the past millennia without the Temple and its associated service.

The emotional aspect of Judaism did not begin with Chasidism. Jews have long emphasized the emotional aspect of Judaism. We value highly the joy inherent in performing a Commandment, שמחה המצוה. However we insist that without Torah knowledge one cannot experience the full beauty of a Commandment or worship of Gd, עבודת ד'. The religious experience of Judaism is connected to Torah knowledge. A Christian can have a religious experience that does not require knowledge and understanding of the faith itself through externalities like music and song, In Judaism, all religious experiences must be grounded in understanding of the underlying Halacha. Even setting up the Chulent for the Sabbath requires significant Halachic knowledge. The Passover Seder is replete with ceremony. However, one cannot fully experience the night of ליל שמורים without studying the associated Halachot. Which sections comprise the Haggada? What is ספור יציאת מצרים and what is זכירת יציאת מצרים? Why do we drink 4 cups of wine and what are the associated requirements? What qualifies as מצה שמורה? How can one have a religious experience on Rosh HaShana, without understanding something about תשר"ת or תקיעות דמיושב ומעומד or why we sound 100 Shofar blasts? What is יומא אריכתא?

Understanding the perspective of Judaism, its השקפת עולם, requires that we understand the Halacha. Attempting to understand Judaism without understanding Halacha is like discussing physics without understanding the underlying mathematical formulae and principles. Many Commandments teach us proper behavior to preempt sin. On the other hand, sacrificial service is often associated with corrective actions after sin. Had we acted appropriately in the first place, there would have been no need to bring the sacrifice, למה לי רוב זבחיכם. The beauty of Judaism does not derive from placing a white cloth on the Sabbath table or lighting a beautiful candelabra. Judaism sine qua non is education and study.

The Priest's role is to teach the people and explain to them the difference between a pure, טהור, and a defiled, טמא, lifestyle we see all around us. The rabbi, who assumes the educational role of the Priest, must present the Torah clearly and explain the importance of the Commandments and study, thus providing the people with a blueprint to appreciate the true beauty of Jewish life through prayer and service of the heart.

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