

929 Leviticus Chapter 7

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation around the 929 chapters of the Hebrew Bible. Below is a contribution about this week's parashah. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

This chapter's description of the *asham*, the guilt-offering, is a recipe of rich flavors and instructions on how to prepare the choicest cuts of meat. The sacrifices are about more than feeding God: humans experience these rituals too, and since the goal is to expiate guilt, the aromas are, in part, for the guilty person or their priestly surrogate to reflect on that guilt, and the life changes to come.

Such an exacting cooking process would produce roasted meat nothing short of delicious. At some level, the answers to the questions of which cuts, how they are cooked, and who eats them are arbitrary. The flavors produced by these processes are consistent, and no singular flavor inherently evokes guilt, forgiveness, or gratitude. Rather, the sacrifices assign human emotions to specific flavors. This codifies a natural human process. Aromas and flavors are some of the strongest emotional triggers we have, and the sacrificial system seeks to pass down what these recipes are meant to evoke.

We also learn how to prepare a meal fit for God. The *asham* opens a world-class meal with deep humility, and infuses the experience with *kedushah*, holiness, for "it is most holy." The *minhah* is translated as "meal offering," and echoes how Jews traditionally relate to bread—it's simply not a meal without it. *Zevah hashelamim's* translation as "wellbeing-offering" conveys the Hebrew's emotion. *Shin lamed mem* suggests wholeness, completeness, and peace. If we are fulfilled, we are at peace, and nothing can be a purer expression of a person's wellbeing than a celebratory meal.

We have built an ever-richer meal culminating in the *zevah*. On their own, these aromas and tastes evoke guilt, forgiveness, servitude, and humility. Together, we experience a wholeness, a satisfaction worth blessing.

And these rites are whole-bodied: Taste, smell, and touch are paramount, allowing our relationship to God to remain rich and present not just in our minds, but also in our physical world. Worshipping, communing with God should be a satisfying, active experience both for us and for God.

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צו תשע"ט



A Child's Gifts

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As an educator, I find it a unique challenge at this time of year to generate meaning from the book of Vayikra, especially for young learners. Homemade board games, guided meditations, and not-so-literal reenactments have all been attempts to translate detailed descriptions of burnt offerings and differentiation of the clean and unclean, into accessible and relatable concepts in our contemporary experience of Judaism.

I wonder how it is, then, that this book has customarily served as a child's first taste of Torah study, an idea highlighted in a midrash on the opening verses of Parashat Tzav. In response to the opening words, "God spoke to Moses, saying: Command Aaron and his sons in this way: This is the ritual of the burnt offering..." (Lev. 6:1-2),

Rabbi Asi says, "for what reason do we begin instructing children in *Torat Kohanim* [Leviticus]? They should begin with Bereishit. But the Holy Blessed One said, "since children are pure, and sacrificial offerings are pure, so should the pure [ones] engage in [study about] the pure [matters]. (*Yalkut Shimoni* 479)

Setting aside any potential concerns about comprehension, this midrash suggests that this sacred material which instructs us in how to maintain our relationship with God on a daily basis is most suitably studied by the youngest among us, those who have not yet accumulated a lifetime of missteps or become jaded as they experience the world.

Perhaps there is a hope that by immersing ourselves in matters related to our most holy selves when we are most capable of expressing that self, we might carry that holiness forward into adulthood. If so, then the book of Vayikra becomes an instruction manual for tapping into our most pure, unblemished selves, with children serving as a model of uncomplicated goodness for adults. Parashat Tzav highlights four different sorts of offerings, including the *asham*, the guilt offering, which could be seen as a tool for maintaining our best selves even when we are guilty of wrongdoing.

Embedded in these verses is perhaps an even greater opportunity to recapture uncomplicated childhood sentiments. God issues a curious command throughout the opening verses of this parashah:

The fire on the altar shall be kept burning, not to go out: every morning the priest shall feed wood to it, lay out the burnt offering on it, and turn into smoke the fat parts of the offerings of well-being. (6:5)

A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the altar, not to go out. (6:6)

The fire must be kept burning at all times, the sacrificial system always ready to operate. Yet, this instruction does not seem so practical for a people destined to spend the next several decades wandering through the wilderness. A midrash, noted by commentators through the years, seeks to explain this instruction:

“A perpetual fire”: [refers to] a constant flame, even on Shabbat, even when unclean. “Not to go out”: Even when journeying, the flame should not go out. What did they do? They covered it with a pot [to protect it], according to Rabbi Yehudah. Rabbi Simeon said, they removed the ashes from it even while traveling, as it says, “They shall remove the ashes from the altar” (Num. 4:13).” (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 4:17)

According to this midrash, this flame was so important it was to be maintained even on Shabbat (when kindling fire was otherwise not permitted), and even when doing so would be logistically challenging. While there was disagreement over the method, this text imagines that the Israelites took great pains to maintain this fire.

There is a parallel here, albeit one that is imbalanced, of a people caring for a fire used in the service of God—who guided them out of slavery embodied in a pillar of fire and cloud. Perhaps this gesture is an attempt to reciprocate the constancy of Divine protection. Just as God has led them to freedom and is guiding them through their travels, the people too nurture and coax this flame to keep on burning. They are giving God cover with a large pot, even as the Divine presence is sheltering them every step of the way.

There are echoes of this commitment, this desire to reflect back to one’s Provider what one has received in the poem “The Lanyard” by Billy Collins. In it, Collins describes the rush of memory he feels when coming across the word “lanyard” in the dictionary, as he is transported back to his time at summer camp, a child making a simple craft project to take home to his mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard . . .

Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Perhaps Collins’s words are most profound as the poem draws to a close:

And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift— not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-toned lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

That small project, lovingly accepted, reassured a young boy that he had reciprocated his mother’s steady giving. That his layering of plastic straps across one another might be an adequate expression of gratitude for his mother’s life-giving and life-sustaining support. Perhaps the Israelites too hoped that their small act of maintaining this fire, of keeping this flame alive for yet another day could be seen as a gesture just as simple yet loving as a little boy’s summer camp project.

Leviticus is a reminder that we still possess that child-like audacity to offer what we can, and hope that in its symbolism, and in its sentiment, it might be enough. To know deep down that we are not evenly matched with our Provider, but that we are compelled, even obligated to offer something in return, however small that gesture might be in comparison. In some way, we want and need to show our love. So we do, by making something that may or may not be useful, and we do it wholeheartedly. It’s about making our own offerings, however small, with the hope, and perhaps the child-like confidence, that our gifts are bound to be treasured by their recipient, whether human or Divine.. We may never learn just how much.

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