

Drawing Near to God

Compared to the action-packed stories of Genesis and Exodus, we are struck by a lack of movement in Leviticus. The entire book is set in one place: at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, in the wilderness, God speaks, forming the people by unveiling a series of laws or instructions: how to worship, how to behave, how to deal with transgressions. Through a system of order and repetitive ritual, the identity of Israel, as God's holy, chosen people, is solidified.

Five kinds of sacrifice are described in the opening chapters of Leviticus. Read one (or more) of these, pondering not only the ritual details but their underlying meaning/purpose. Note that the Hebrew term *korban*, 'sacrifice', has been rendered 'near-bringing' by some translators. In bringing the gift to be offered near to the altar, the worshipper draws close to God. As strange as these ancient practices may appear to our 21st century lives, we can still ponder their capacity to speak to our desire to 'draw near' to God.

Israel's Temple sacrifices ceased in 70 CE with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans and the accompanying devastation inflicted on Jewish life. Yet reflection on Leviticus continued (and continues) in creative, and at times controversial, forms as the Jewish sages sought to plumb the deeper meaning of the Torah's sacrificial laws.

A famous controversy emerged between the views of two great medieval Jewish Torah scholars: Maimonides and Nahmanides.¹ Maimonides proposed the idea that the sacrifices were God's way of weaning the Israelites from pagan sacrifice. To have suddenly dismantled all that was familiar would have been too unsettling and discouraging, says Maimonides. Leviticus "was prompted by Divine wisdom, according to which people are allowed to continue the kind of worship to which they have been accustomed, in order that they might acquire true faith".

Maimonides saw sacrifice as a preventative measure against idolatry. But Nahmanides would have none of this emphasis. In his eyes it weakened the value of sacrifice *in itself*. He held the view that the external ritual process gives rise to a process of internalization. The offerer gains insight into his own patterns of thought, speech, action and is moved to improve his behavior.

"All this should make him realize that having sinned against God with his body and soul, he would deserve to have his blood spilled and his body burnt. However, God in His infinite mercy, accepts this substitute for an atonement, and its blood in lieu of his..."

The role of ritual as an authentic expression of faith is a theme that appears in the *Sefer haHinukh* (a famous medieval Jewish education text): "The mind is influenced mainly by deeds. It is not enough for the sinner to cleanse his mind and commit himself to avoid further sinning with mere words. For this purpose a significant act [i.e., the complex sacrificial action] must be performed."

Maimonides himself would agree: whether in biblical times or today, no one can worship God "in thought only, without practice."

The Maimonides v Nahmanides controversy has stimulated Jewish thinking through the centuries. In what way does it stimulate yours as you reflect on today's Torah portion? •

1. Maimonides: d.1204. Nahmanides: d.1270. Cited in Leibowitz, 3,8-9,10.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (Jerusalem, 1993).

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