



Parashat Shemini

Opening the Window Within and the Closet Without

by Moshe Ben Chacon on Saturday April 14, 2007

26 Nisan 5767

Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47, Shabbat

And he said to Aaron, "Take a calf from the herd for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering, without blemish, and offer them before God." (Lev 9:2)

From the very beginning, this week's Torah portion, *Shemini*, poses some gargantuan challenges to progressive-minded Jews. I can already picture the aversion and revulsion. And let me warn you now: The rest of the portion doesn't get much better: *"You shall speak to the children of Israel, saying, 'Take a male goat for a sin offering; and a calf and a lamb, both a year old, without blemish, for a burnt offering.'" (Lev 9:3)*

In *Shemini*, Moses, Aaron and his sons continue the process of consecrating the *Mishkan* that they began in last week's portion: *Tzav*. In addition, both the *kohanim* (priests) and the larger community are instructed on how to properly perform their respective roles.

Goats, calf, lamb, bulls!? Sacrifice!? Animal rights activists, rationalists and intellectuals are all left to wonder, "What the heck is all this about?" And how can gay activists be expected to find any relevance whatsoever in a portion that proves to be so almost completely impractical, antiquated and seemingly obsolete?

So first things first. Back in 12th century Spain, a great Jewish scholar, Rambam, asserted that God allowed sacrificial offerings as a way to accommodate to the archaic and primitive habits of the ancient world inherited by pagan traditions, but that the Israelites were to continue to evolve to a point where they would no longer need sacrifices to atone for their sins. That practice was to be substituted by repentance, prayer and good deeds.

But there we were in the desert, lost, impatient, eager for some excitement—yearning for a direct connection with an invisible God, when suddenly Moses says: *"This is the thing which God commanded that you should do: and the glory of Hashem shall appear to you."* (Lev 9:6) Cool. We all want to see magic, grandeur, an apotheosis, a spectacle. But what price do we have to pay for it? Now that, my friends, is a fundamental question we ask ourselves every day for every action, in every decision. The portion elaborates on how the offering is to be



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rendered. And behold! A tragic event befalls two of Aaron's sons as they are consumed by fire: "And Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his censer, and put fire in it, and put incense on it, and offered strange fire before Hashem, which He commanded them not. And there went out fire from Hashem, and devoured them, and they died before Hashem." (Lev 10:1)

But, do you remember the challenge that we are faced with? We want miracles and grandeur, in addition to love, attention, compassion, respect and all the good things in the world. But the question remains: What price do we have to pay? When we reach the end of *Shemini*, it seems like the initial mission has been successfully accomplished (we have witnessed miracles and grandeur). But, we have not yet learned the price we must pay for it. And indeed, we will not make this discovery in this week's portion. Instead, we must reach far beyond this portion and revisit this story with different eyes and a different perspective in mind. So I suggest the following: first, a quick etymological analysis followed by an historical one.

Two crucial words in this portion are *Mishkan* (tabernacle) and *Korban* (sacrifice). *Mishkan* comes from the word *Shechinah* (Divine Presence; the feminine aspect of God) because it's the place wherein God's divine presence was said to dwell. A very beautiful *midrash* says that the windows of the Temple (the building that succeeded the *Mishkan*) were always kept open, so the Divine presence of God would shine her light and illuminate the whole world.

The word *Korban* is created from the root *kuf-resh-bet* which forms the verb *lekarev* ("to get closer"). Hence we understand that the ultimate role of the sacrifice was to get closer to God. The Israelites had the confines of the *Mishkan* to present their offerings, guided by several restrictions which included very specific instructions on how to slaughter sacrificial animals in the quickest, most painless way possible. With the destruction of the first and second Temples, the Israelites lost that special place for sacrificial cults. Religion and spirituality then suffered a dramatic shift.

The sages in our tradition say that in the absence of the Temple, our body is the *Mishkan*, our mind is the *Cohen* (the priest) and it is incumbent on each one of us to draw near the Divine presence and find that little window within ourselves that will shine wisdom and compassion to the world.

How can we achieve that individually? How can we draw near God's presence and find that little window within ourselves? In order for that to happen, most of us have to tackle—and ultimately move beyond—so many deeply rooted fears, traumas and stigmas. When we grow up in communities that tell us that our love is impure, that our affection is grotesque and that our existence is an abomination, how can we possibly look at ourselves as a source of light? The figure of the *Mishkan* teaches us an important lesson: to draw near God's presence, the Israelites had to follow strict guidelines to sanctify and consecrate the Temple. Likewise, we need to sanctify ourselves and our existence in order to attune with God.



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And what is the role of our communities? The sages teach us that what caused God's Divine Presence to leave the Temple and allow for its physical destruction was animosity, lack of unity and compassion among the Jews. As gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews we demand no less than inclusion and acceptance. We demand that we will be looked in the eye as full members of Jewish communal life and not as a threat to family values, but as part of them.

So what is the price we have to pay for miracles and love in our lives? It is not to sacrifice a calf, a ram, a goat or a bull, but rather, it is hatred, intolerance and bigotry that we must sacrifice in our communities.



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