

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to Chaim and Sherry Berlin, for sponsoring this *drasha* in memory of Sherry's mother, Leah Feig Breuer, Leah Bas Shlomo, whose *yahrzeit* is the 7th of Nisan. May her *Neshama* have an aliya and may Chaim and Sherry be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

How do you get close to God? Every religion in history has wrestled with that question. There are two ways people try to find God: Through the intellect. Reason your way upward. Think clearly enough and you will arrive at the divine. And through feeling. Wait for the overwhelming moment — the sunrise, the symphony, the sudden rush of awe — and there you will find God.

Each of these paths has something real in it. And yet neither of them is the Torah's answer.

Parshas Vayikra opens with another approach called *Parshas Korbanos*. אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ קָרְבָן לַיהוָה.

One word unlocks everything. Not *adam ki yakriv korban* — when a person brings a *korban*. But *adam ki yakriv mikem korban* — when you bring a *korban* from **you**. From *yourselves*.

The **Seforno** reads this phrase with surgical precision.

ספורנו ויקרא פרק א פסוק ב: אדם כי יקריב מכם. כי יקריב מעצמכם בוידוי דברים והכנעה על דרך ונשלמה פרים שפתינו (הושע יד, ג) וכאמרו זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה (תהלים נא, ט), כי אין חפץ בכסילים המקריבים בלתי הכנעה קודמת.

The *korban* must come from you. The animal on the altar is not the offering. **You are the offering**; mind focused, heart open, hands pressed, weight forward; with **humility** and vulnerability. That is what Hashem is asking for—full commitment, both intellect and feeling. The animal is just the vehicle.

To understand this more deeply, we need to focus on one more word, **korban**:

Rav Hirsch (*Vayikra* 1:2) writes: *We have no word in Western languages that adequately conveys the concept inherent in the Hebrew term קרבן. Unfortunately, in the sense of sacrifice, it has taken on the connotation of destruction, annihilation, loss, a connotation that is foreign and antithetical to the Hebrew concept of קרבן. The purpose of a קרבן is to seek God's nearness [language of קרוב, to draw closer].*

A *korban* is an act of closeness. Every time a Jew brought a *korban*, he was not paying a debt. He was closing a distance. Hashem is asking us to come close; as you are, with everything you are.

But the Torah does not stop there. It goes further. Much further. Later in *Parshas Vayikra*, when the Torah describes the flour offering, the *mincha*, something changes. Everywhere else in this *parsha*, the Torah uses the word *adam*, a person, brings a *korban*. But when it comes to the *mincha*, the flour offering, the Torah shifts: נֶפֶשׁ כִּי תִקְרִיב קָרְבָן מִנְחָה לַיהוָה. When a *soul* brings a flour offering to Hashem. *Adam*, a man, disappears. *Nefesh*, a soul, takes its place.

Rashi asks the obvious question: Why does the Torah choose this particular offering, and only this one, to use the term *nefesh*? He answers:

לא נאמר נפש בכל קרבנות נדבה אלא במנחה — מי נרפו להתנדב מנחה? עני. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: מעלה אני עליו פאולו הקריב נפשו.

The word nefesh is not used in any other voluntary offering — only in the mincha. Who typically brings a mincha? A poor person. The Holy One Blessed be He says: I consider it as if he brought his very soul.

Notice what Rashi is pointing to. The word *nefesh* appears hundreds of times in the Torah. But of all the *korbanos* — the bulls, the sheep, the goats, the birds — Hashem reserves this word for the handful of flour brought by someone who has nothing else to offer. Why? **Because the flour was truly everything he had. He truly gave himself.** And Hashem says: *that* is what I call a *nefesh* brought to the altar, the real point of every *korban*. The animal was always just the vehicle.

Now we can understand the single most dramatic moment in all of the laws of *korbanos*. The Torah commands (*Vayikra 1:4*): וְסָמַךְ יָדוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ הָעֹלָה — he shall lean his hand upon the head of the *korban*. This is not a light touch. The word *semichah* means to press down with full body weight.

And the *Mishnah in Menachos* (93a) is explicit: it had to be done בשתי ידי — with both hands. You pressed yourself against the animal with your entire weight. Not gently. But forcefully.

Why? The **Ramban**, (*Vayikra 1:9*) reveals the answer. He explains that, in truth, the person who has sinned should himself be the offering. Every limb that sinned, the hands, the eyes, the heart, should be, in strict justice, be brought to the altar. But Hashem, in His infinite mercy, accepts the animal as a substitute. The animal's blood corresponds to the person's blood. The animal's fat corresponds to the person's flesh. The smoke rising from the altar corresponds to his soul ascending toward heaven.

כדי שיחשוב אדם בעשותו כל אלה כי חטא לאלהיו בגופו ובנפשו, וראוי לו שישפך דמו וישרף גופו לולא חסד הבורא שלקה ממנו תמורה וכפר הקרבן הזה שיהא דמו תחת דמו, נפש תחת נפש, וראשי אברי הקרבן כנגד ראשי אבריו, והמנות להחיות בהן מורי התורה שיתפללו עליו.

Semicha is the moment that makes this real and personal. The person presses his hands on the animal's head, his full weight, his full body, his full self, and says without words: this is me. What happens to this animal is what I deserve. I am not sending a proxy. I am here. I give You everything I am.

There is a difference between a donor and a volunteer. A donor gives money from what he has; an amazingly selfless act, to part with something one may have invested considerable effort to acquire. But a volunteer gives something deeper—his time, his presence, his essence. When you give time, you give yourself.

Let me share an illustration of giving of oneself to another. For many years, the local grocery store in **Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's** neighborhood was run by a widow. Delivery vans would pull up at dawn, and the truckers would deposit crates of milk and dairy products on the sidewalk, and she would have to drag them inside, an exhausting endeavor. One day, when she came to the store, she noticed that the crates had been placed at the front entrance, considerably easing her workload. This phenomenon continued day after day, so one morning she made a point of arriving at the store very early to thank the delivery drivers. However, to her amazement, when the vans appeared, the drivers deposited her delivery on the sidewalk, as they had always done in the past. Perplexed, she stood on the pavement wondering how the heavy crates had apparently transported themselves to her door, when suddenly Rav Shlomo Zalman appeared, *tallis* and *tefillin* in hand, and he lifted the heavy crates, one by one, and deposited them at the front entrance of the grocery store, and then hurried off to *shul*.

Korbanos were Hashem's way of asking not for a donation, but for a **volunteer**. Not: send Me something. Rather, come ready to use your hands. Be here. Give Me *you*. Hashem is not building a fundraising campaign. He is building a relationship. And relationships are built with presence, not payments.

Think about what happens at a Jewish wedding. The *chossan* places a ring on the *kallah's* finger and says: הִנֵּה אַתָּה מְקַדְּשֶׁת לִי behold, you are dedicated to me. The ring has a specific monetary value and its transfer is the legal mechanism that creates the marriage. But no one thinks the marriage is *about* the ring. The ring is the **symbol** of something much larger: the giving of oneself to another. Similarly, that is what the Torah means by bringing a קָרְבָן. It is not paying a bill. It is a statement: I organize my life around my relationship with You. A *korban* is a moment of *kiddushin* between a person and Hashem. I am organizing myself around You. I am Yours.

And this is what the Rambam understood when he wrote one of the most moving letters in all of Jewish literature to **Ovadiah, a ger tzedek**, a righteous convert. He had written to ask: when I *daven*, when I say

Elokeinu v'Elokei avoseinu — the God of our fathers — can I really say those words? Avraham is not my biological ancestor. Can these words be mine?

The **Rambam's** answer is breathtaking. “...Avraham our Father taught the people, opened their minds, and revealed to them the true faith and the unity of God; he rejected the idols and abolished their adoration... Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and declares the unity of Hashem... are Avraham’s household, as it is he who converted them to righteousness. The same way he converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts future generations through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus Avraham our Father, peace be with him, is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism. Therefore, you shall pray, “Our God” and “God of our fathers,” because Avraham, peace be with him, is your father.

The Rambam tells Ovadiah: you have left your family, your nation, your culture, everything familiar — and you came to Hashem with your full weight. And, therefore, the Rambam writes *Avraham is your father, too, and you may say Elokeinu v'Elokei avoseinu*. That is the idea of a *korban*. That is *semicha*. Avraham did not have to bring a bull. He did not have to bring a flour offering. He brought himself to Hashem.

Now I want to tell you about the very first *korban* ever brought by the Jewish people — not as individuals, but as a nation. It was not brought in the *Beis HaMikdash*. It was not brought in the *Mishkan*. It was brought in *Mitzrayim*, on the night before the Exodus, under conditions of mortal danger. The ***Korban Pesach***.

And Hashem’s command was unlike any other. Hashem did not say: bring this *korban* quietly, in private, where no one can see. Hashem said: take a sheep into your homes in full, view of the Egyptians, take the blood and smear it on your doorpost. On the outside. Where everyone can see it. Where your Egyptian neighbors can see it. Where Pharaoh's taskmasters can see it. Put it at the entrance to your home, in full public view, in the middle of the night in a country that had enslaved and murdered your people for 210 years.

Stop for a moment and think about what that required. Egypt resented and oppressed them. And now Hashem was asking every Jewish family to stand at their front door — the most visible place in their home — and declare publicly, in blood: we are not Pharaoh's people. We belong to Hashem.

The families who stood at their doorposts in Egypt that night — who reached up with their hyssop branches and pressed the blood against the wood — they knew. In that moment, they knew what they were. They were Hashem's people. They had always been Hashem's people. And now they were saying it out loud, in blood, at the entrance to their homes. That is the meaning of a *korban*. That is the meaning of *mikem*. From you.

That was the moment the Jewish nation became *mekudeshes* to Hashem. We walked out of Egypt, not as free people wandering wherever they wished — but as a people dedicated, oriented, pointed toward Sinai and toward Him.

The ***Gemara in Brachos (26b)*** tells us that, after the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*, the Rabbis instituted the daily *tefillos* to correspond to the daily *korbanos*. תפילות כנגד תמידין תקנום — the prayers were established corresponding to the daily offerings. Today, we have no *Beis HaMikdash*. We have no *mizbeach*. We cannot bring a *korban*. But we are not left without a way to come close to Hashem. By *davening*, we are pressing ourselves — our full weight, our full attention, our full self — before Hashem

and saying: I am here. I am not merely sending words. I am bringing *myself*—intellect and feeling. Because each of us knows what it feels like to go through the motions without being there at all. To say the words of Tefilla—but for our mind to be somewhere else entirely.

And here the *halacha* teaches us something that I find myself thinking about when I stand for *Shemoneh Esreh* in front of my *shtender*. When you stand for *Shemoneh Esreh*, you are **not** permitted to lean on anything.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות תפילה סימן צד:ח:יש ליזהר שלא לסמוך עצמו לעמוד או להבירו, בשעת תפלה.

Not on a wall. Not on a table. Not on a chair. The *poskim* rule that if you lean with enough weight that removing the support would cause you to fall—you have not fulfilled the *mitzva* of *tefillah*. You must stand on your own. Unsupported. Your full self, bearing its own weight, before Hashem. At first glance, this seems like the opposite of *semicha*. With the *korban*, you *press yourself onto* something. With *tefillah*, you must stand *without pressing on* anything.

But look again—and you see that it is exactly the same idea, expressed from two different directions.

When you brought a *korban*, you pressed yourself onto the animal to say: this is me. I am identified with this. I am giving myself through this act. But when you *daven*, you stand without support to say: I am here. I am not leaning on anything else. I am not hiding behind anything. I am not propped up by habit or distraction or the person standing next to me. I stand here alone, my full, unadorned, unsupported self, before the Infinite. In both cases, the demand is identical. No proxies. No props. No performance. Just me. Just my *nefesh*. **מִכֶּם**, *from within*.

The *korban* says: press yourself forward through the animal. *Tefillah* says: stand on your own. They are saying the same thing to the same person. Hashem does not want what you bring. He wants **who you are**. Every word of *Shemoneh Esreh* truly meant, every bracha said with intention, every act of chesed, every word of Torah offered with the awareness that Hashem commanded it—these are our korbanos. They always were.

Tefilla means to stop, and simply stand quietly and say to Hashem: I am here standing before You with everything I have. As *Parshas Vayikra* teaches with 'אָדָם כִּי יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קָרְבָן לַיהוָה'. Not from your possessions. Not from your surplus. From you. The *korban* Hashem seeks is not merely what the Jew brings, but the Jew himself.

At every *Pesach seder* we declare: בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר תִּיב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עֲצֻמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם — in every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he personally left Egypt. Not as a historian. But as a participant. As someone who stood at the doorpost, placed the blood against the wood with his own hands, and said: I belong to Hashem.

On the night of *Pesach*, our ancestors stood at their doorposts and declared in public: we belong to Hashem. And every year we stand again. At our *sedorim*. In our *tefillos*. In the quiet commitments of Jewish everyday life. And Hashem asks the same question He asked then: Not what will you give Me, but will you give Me yourself?

In less than two weeks, each of us will sit at a Seder table with the same opportunity our ancestors had at their doorposts: to say to Hashem, I am here. I belong to You. The *korban* we offer that night is not the *zorec*, not even the matzah or the wine. It is the person sitting in the chair. The question of the Seder is not: what will you say? The question is: will you be there—fully present?

May we come close to Hashem, and may we soon celebrate the *Korban Pesach* again, לשנה הבאה בירושלים, הבנויה.