

## Parshat Vayikra: On Ritual Reenactment Sarah Kaufman, Class of 2025

---

Modern Jews are uncomfortable every year when we begin *sefer Vayikra*. Animal sacrifices, *korbanot*, are a relic of the past, part of a sacrificial cult, no longer relevant to our 21st-century lives. Well, we may be modern, but we're in good medieval company. The Rambam shares our discomfort and says *korbanot* were simply training wheels for Israel (Moreh Nevuchim 3:32). We needed them thousands of years ago because our pagan-influenced minds demanded a recognizable and physical system of worship. The Rambam argues that the ideal form of worship is prayer, so even when the Temple is eventually rebuilt we won't offer sacrifices. It seems that even Jews in the Middle Ages shared our discomfort, embarrassment, and perhaps, even our disdain at the thought of communicating with Hashem through the ritual sacrifice of animals.

Yet, the rabbis meticulously recorded the procedure of offering sacrifices even after the Temple's destruction. Why would they do so if *korbanot* were merely a set of outdated rituals from a vaguely pagan system?

Two main approaches to the question of why *korbanot* have value come from the Ramban and Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch. The Ramban says *korbanot* are a means of atonement, without which God could not dwell with us in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Vayikra 1:9). No matter how careful we are, we still sin all the time, both intentionally and unintentionally. So *kohanim* (priests) offered *korbanot* every day for our sake, thereby allowing the *Shechina* to rest in the Temple.

Rav Hirsch, on the other hand, says *korbanot* are not as much about sin but are rather a means to get closer to God. After all, the Hebrew word *korban* comes from the root *karov*, meaning to draw close. So we don't offer *korbanot* because we're human and always sinning and need to atone, but rather because we are yearning for and striving towards an intimate relationship with God.

Rav Hirsch's position makes sense, since we don't have as many tangible ways to connect with God in these modern times. There's prayer, of course, and the rabbis of the Talmud tell us in numerous ways how prayer has substituted for *korbanot*. Prayer may be in service of the same end as *korbanot*, but it is a very different act. I think there is inherent value in a concrete act of devotion — not just that sacrifices were training wheels so we could later become more sophisticated and turn simply to prayer and other kinds of abstraction.



13 Adar II 5784 | March 23, 2024

The whole idea of *korbanot* and the Temple is that God *wants* to dwell among us, *wants* to be close to us. Every time I read about the *Mishkan*, I'm blown away that God chooses to limit Godself and be among us. God is everywhere, as we know, but God also wants to be in one place: with us. God is transcendent and in many ways unknowable, but God still wants a relationship and is willing to come down to us to make it happen. The *korbanot*, offered in a physical space, gave us concrete action so we could build that relationship.

Perhaps this is why the rabbis sought to preserve the order of *korbanot*. Of course, they hoped the Temple would be rebuilt and wanted Bnei Yisrael to be ready, but they also understood the inherent value of *korbanot*. They understood the importance of action and physical ritual. With *kavod* (honor) to the Rambam, a Judaism of abstractions is not sufficient.

In fact, we experience the necessity and power of physical ritual all the time. On Yom Kippur, we act out the *Avodah* (service), when the *Kohen Gadol* would enter the Holy of Holies and atone for us. We prostrate ourselves to mimic Bnei Yisrael when they heard the *Kohen Gadol* (high priest) say the name of God, and knew they were forgiven. On Pesach, we read the Haggadah as a kind of reenactment of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (the leaving of Egypt), and we eat the Hillel sandwich with matzah and *maror* to remember what was done during Temple times. Every Friday, when we sprinkle salt on our challah, we are acting out *korbanot* and turning our table into a *mizbeach*, an altar. We serve God through action, and *korbanot* were an effective means.

The Gemara in Menachot 110a expands *korbanot* beyond human beings. The Rabbis question a verse found in Divrei HaYamim where King Shlomo is about to build the Temple. The verse says: *l'olam zoat al Yisrael [the Temple and its sacrifices] are an ordinance forever*. The Gemara asks, how could Shlomo say such a thing considering the Temple is eventually destroyed? Rav says Shlomo is referring to the heavenly altar, where the angel Michael continues to offer *korbanot* to God. Rabbi Yochanan disagrees and says it refers to Torah scholars, who learn the laws of the Temple service, and King Shlomo gives them credit as if the Temple still exists in their day and they are serving in it.

Most of us are probably inclined to the latter interpretation by Rabbi Yochanan, that learning is sufficient. But I find Rav's suggestion to be particularly beautiful, that these physical acts of serving God continue even after the Temple is destroyed. And we play our part as well when we reenact our history through ritual, whether at Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shabbat, and every other time of the year. We need deeds, not just thoughts,



13 Adar II 5784 | March 23, 2024

to sustain our relationship with God. *Korbanot* and their echoes remind us of their importance.

---

*Sarah Kaufman is a Core Semikha student at Yeshivat Maharat. She is currently an intern at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School, teaching Judaic Studies to middle-school students, and at Ohr Torah Stone's Jewish Learning Center of New York, teaching fundamentals of Judaism and halakha to potential converts with Rabbi David Kalb. Sarah previously taught high school students at the Genesis Program at Brandeis University and the Tikvah Fund. Sarah also served as the Maharat Intern at Beth Shalom Talmud Torah in Potomac, MD. She is a graduate of Johns Hopkins University and spent a year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.*