

Parshat Vayikra - Zachor

Thinking Before You Help or Helping Before You Think?

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“Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who do study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it.”

-Tom Toro, cartoonist for *The New Yorker*

Studying history allows us to understand the implications of decisions and crisis patterns. However, even the most educated seem relatively unable to prevent or stop catastrophic events. Actionable items like charity, raising awareness, and attending rallies can seem insufficient when compared to the magnitude of a crisis that is taking a toll on human lives. Inaction seems callous, but perhaps these actions are merely a way to appease the anxiety of our own real helplessness.

The consideration of a (wo)man’s ability to impact the greater world is an ancient conundrum. This week’s parsha, Vayikra, introduces the laws of the *Korbanot*, sacrifices that were given to serve God, to thank God, and to atone for our sins. On the one hand, sacrifices are tangible methods of serving an unknowable God. However, sacrifices can also seem similarly insignificant adjacent to the human condition. After a sin, can an animal sacrifice truly atone for our misdeeds? Did a sacrifice really fulfil the human need to thank God after a crisis averted? To thank God after the birth of a child? Or, perhaps, were the sacrifices simply a way to appease the human mind?

Rashi alludes to this issue in his introductory comments on Sefer Vayikra. The book of Vayikra opens with the words: ויקרא ה' אל משה – And God called to Moshe. Rashi relates this calling, this קרא of Hashem, to the calling of the angels in the sixth chapter of Yeshayahu. Yeshayahu envisions angels calling to one another:

וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל זֶה וְאָמַר קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ יְקִיָּקָוֹ צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא כֹל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ - ישעיהו ו:ג

And one would call to the other, “Holy, holy, holy! The LORD of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!”

This calling is a theme of the metaphysical relationship between God and man, that although God is holy and separate, He fills the earth with His glory and also is involved in our world. Rashi uses this Midrash to introduce why and how sacrifices work; God is involved in the world, and can impact both seemingly small and large events in seen and unseen ways. This explanation highlights the question in another way; yes, God is involved, and therefore there is a dimension of action and impact that is beyond what human beings can see, but can human beings really impact God’s actions?

This week we will also read Parshat Zachor, recounting the battle with Amalek after the Exodus from Egypt. In that battle, Moses stood up on a mountain while the Jewish people, along with Yehoshua, fought the physical war. The Torah writes that Moshe’s hands needed

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to be raised, because Bnei Yisrael's victory depended upon Moshe's hands being raised towards the sky. Did Moshe's hands control the war? Why would he ever put them down? Did Bnei Yisrael's actions even matter? And where was God in all of this?

The Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah addresses this exact question:

וְכִי יָדָיו שָׁל מֹשֶׁה עוֹשׂוֹת מְלַחֲמָה אוֹ שׁוֹבְרוֹת מְלַחֲמָה? ראש השנה ג:ח

Were Moshe's hands really controlling the war?

The Mishnah explains that when Bnei Yisrael looked upwards at Moshe they would focus their attention on serving God, which allowed them to be victorious against Amalek. The Mishnah does not want to see Moshe's hands as some magical omen that determined the outcome of the battle, but rather, it was the minds and hearts of the people focusing towards God that led them to victory.

The Mishnah's answer, however, does not address how the intentions of our hearts and minds impact physical events, similar to a physical battle. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, known as the Eish Kodesh, offers an explanation in his Torah on Parshat Vayikra given in the Warsaw ghetto in 1939. The Eish Kodesh comments on the Rashi referenced above that connected the קרא in Vayikra to the קרא in Yeshayahu. The Targum Yonatan translates the word קרא in the context of the angels calling to each other as ומקבלין – and they received. The angels, explains the Eish Kodesh, can receive/call when human beings are compassionate to one another. This is when the angels are able to call out to God to ask for compassion.

The Eish Kodesh, in 1939, was addressing an audience who were extremely limited in what they could do for one another, despite horrific events all around them. Rabbi Shapira explained to them that even having compassion to another person, listening to their pain and allowing it to enter your soul, could arouse something in Heaven in ways that are hidden from the human eyes.

We do not really know or see what the Heavens are doing or why there is suffering in the world. There is work to be done by human beings that is not done by God, like donations, awareness, compassion, showing up, and advocacy. Prayer, compassion, and intent, we believe, also impact what we cannot see, namely God's actions in this world. It can be frustrating to not fully understand or comprehend the impacts of our actions, and the feeling of helplessness can be overwhelming.

This week we will read Megillat Esther. Esther sits in the palace, unaffected physically by the tragic situation of her nation in Persia. Under the threat of Haman, Mordechai pleads with Esther to use her position as queen to help the Jewish people. However, it was not clear to either of them at the time how Esther could or would help. Mordechai famously pleads with Esther:

וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לְעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לְמַלְכוּת?

Who knows if perhaps, this is the reason you became the Queen?

Esther first invites Achashveirosh and Haman to a party, only to invite them to another party. At the time, perhaps, Esther was unsure how her actions would impact the Jewish people. She was making connections, waiting for the proper time to advocate. The process was slow, and even after Haman was killed, the decree to exterminate the Jewish people was still in place! However, Esther and Mordechai continued to advocate and plan and eventually saved the Jewish people.

We do not know or understand the impact of our actions. There are small and big things to be done. Who knows what will ultimately bring salvation?



Atara Lindenbaum is a Jewish educator, and currently lives in Israel. Atara leads and directs Yeshivat Maharat's Emerging Scholars in Israel Program and teaches classes for conversion through the Israeli Rabbinate in Tel Aviv. In the past, Atara served as the Director of Community Education at the Tel Aviv International Synagogue, and has also taught both middle school and high school students at Beren Academy in Houston, TX, Maimonides School in Boston, MA, and The Ramaz School in New York, NY. Atara is a trained educator, and completed the Tanakh Educator's Program through Matan in Jerusalem and Hebrew University. Atara has a Masters as well in Urban Planning from Hunter University, and has worked in community planning, focusing on methods of inclusion and equitable distribution of resources.

Atara is looking forward to utilising all her acquired skills to support communities of spirituality and meaning that are inviting and welcoming to all who want to join.