SELFLESS SACRIFICE
By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The next few portions teach us the laws of sacrifices. Comprehending their meaning and symbolism is even more difficult than proficiency in the essence of their complex laws and details. Obviously, decrees that have not been observed since the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash nearly 2,000 years ago are difficult to comprehend. The offerings of animals, flour and oil mixtures, birds, and spices upon an altar are almost forbidding to the psyche of a twentieth-century thinker.

In fact, every year I get responses to these weeks’ portions from prominent secular business people questioning the reason of sacrifice. Internet drashas are not the forum to expound these mysteries. Tomes have been written by the greatest thinkers in Judaism to rationalize the loftiness of Omnipotent directives to mortal minds.

Yet, despite our inability to fully comprehend, we must still realize that the absolution of sin was not complete without offering some corporal item to Hashem, through His kohanim (priests), in place of the mortal who should have been taken instead. The opening words of the Book of VaYikra, the Toras Kohanim, has Moshe command the nation, “When an Adam – a man — from among you brings an offering to Hashem” (Leviticus 1:2). The Torah then proceeds with the hows, the whens, the wheres, and the whos of the complexities of the korbonos (sacrifices). The opening verse receives as much scrutiny as the ensuing intricacies. The commentaries extrapolate upon every syllable.

“When an Adam from among you brings an offering to Hashem.” In this verse the word used for man is not the normally used Ish, but rather Adam – surely a reference to that solitary, lonely being who once dwelled in the Garden of Eden. The words “from among you” also raise question. Isn’t every individual “from among you?” Why doesn’t the Torah begin its prefacing remarks, “when one offers a sacrifice”? Why Adam? Why “among you”?

The Rabbi was preaching to a packed crowd. The mood was somber and tense as he expounded on the gravity of sin. He exhorted the massed to repent – to do teshuva – and to come back to the faith and laws of their Creator. Then he added the clincher. He was reluctant to use the power of those words, but he knew that they would stir his audience. “Does everybody in this community know what is going to happen to them?” He asked. “Everyone in this community is going to die!” Everyone in the audience was aghast with fear. The somberness of the moment was captured in the deep creases that suddenly formed upon their faces. Except for one elderly gentleman who sat in the second row directly in front of the rabbi. He had a broad smile on his face. In fact, he was chuckling. The rabbi was disturbed. Perhaps the old timer did not get the point. In even louder tones the rabbi implored, “It is time to repent!” Then he added, this time with increased fervor, “Did you hear me? Everyone in this community is going to die!” The man’s smile broadened. He seemed numb to the countenance of his fellow listeners – the rabbi’s words simply had no effect on him. The rabbi stared directly at him and with a passion in his voice, he asked “What’s the matter with you? Don’t you realize that everyone in this community is going to die? “The old man stared back, his smile broader than ever. “Heh Heh! He chuckled. It’s alright rabbi, I’m not from this community!”

The Torah tells us the secret of sacrifices way before it details the actual offering. When an Adam will sacrifice from among you: There are no islands, and there are no individuals. Every sacrifice comes “from among you.” The juxtaposition of the contrasting words – Adam – the sole creation from whom humanity descended — and the words MiChem – from among you — the hoards of humanity that form Klall Yisrael — are forever inseparable. Every action represents community and influences it as well.

Everybody, every action, whether an act of benevolence, charity or sacrifice, ripples a community. The Torah precludes the laws and details of the individual that offers upon the altar of the Almighty with the words – Adam from amongst you. No Adam emerges from emptiness. No action is performed in solitude. For the Adams of today live not as the sole occupants of an empty Garden of Eden. They are clearly part of the greater community, and everything they do comes from, and affects those, who are among you.
Sefer VaYikrah opens with the expression: “And HASHEM called to Moshe.” The word ויקרא is written with a small aleph. The Baal HaTurim explains that this was because of Moshe Rabbeinu’s extreme humility. HASHEM told him to write the word ויקרא with an aleph. That implies that HASHEM called Moshe to come forward for an audience. Moshe felt that was too much honor. He wanted it to appear as if it were more of a random occurrence. When HASHEM spoke to Bilaam, the Torah used the expression ‘ויקר to mean that it wasn’t a formal audience, just a chance happening. So Moshe requested to write the word here without the aleph. HASHEM told him not to do that, but to write the word out fully. Out of his extreme humility, Moshe said he would only write it with a small aleph to somehow keep the connotation that it wasn’t a formal invitation.

When we focus on this discussion, we see a beautiful illustration of humility — with a bit of a twist. HASHEM called out to Moshe and spoke to him in a manner different than to any other person. HASHEM specifically told Moshe to write that in the Torah. After all, it was true, and it was important for the Klal Yisroel to recognize the greatness of their leader. Moshe felt that while everyone might already have known it, to have it recorded that way for generations was just too much kavod, so he asked to have it stricken from the record.

HASHEM told him no; it must remain. So out of deference to HASHEM, Moshe wrote it, but not in its full form, only with a small aleph. Moshe ran from the kavod, a very impressive show of humility. Yet if we think about this discussion, it doesn’t sound humble at all. HASHEM was giving Moshe directions for writing the Torah, the very blueprint for Creation. HASHEM instructed Moshe to write the word “Vayikrah” with a large aleph. Moshe said no. HASHEM insisted. Moshe still said no. Finally Moshe compromised, “All right, I will write it, but my way — small.” This doesn’t sound very obedient, and certainly not humble! It sounds audacious. An unassuming man would listen to the Creator of the heavens and the earth and do as he was told.

The answer to this can be found by understanding the balance between the greatness of man and humility. To do this, let’s begin with a moshol.

Imagine that you are passing a commercial construction site where you see a large crane digging out a foundation. The crane lifts up loads of dirt, rocks, rubble — moving tons of earth with each scoop. Operating the crane is Joe. Joe is very overweight and is a chain smoker. Another worker approaches Joe and says, “Joe, look at you! 80 lbs overweight, smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. You’ve gotta do something about your health. Go the gym, work out, and get in shape.” Joe turns to his coworker and says, “Me, work out? What do you think I do all day long? I lift heavy loads, tons and tons of dirt and move it from one side of the site to the other.” “Joe, that isn’t you lifting the dirt. It’s the crane,” exclaims the coworker. “You’re just the guy pulling the levers. The crane is doing all the lifting!”

This is an apt parable to man. I occupy a body. This body has a mind that is brilliant and a mouth that is articulate. It was created in the image of HASHEM. Look at what it can accomplish; look what it can do. It is deserving of extraordinary honor. And I . . . am the occupant of this body. I am the little guy inside who pulls the levers.

I didn’t create the body. I don’t know how to stretch the skin over the facial bones. I don’t know how to weave the one hundred billion neurons that comprise my brain. I am the little guy inside who tells the arms to move, who tells the mouth to open. So am I deserving of honor? The body that I occupy sure is; just look at what it can do. But I am that little guy inside — small, insignificant, unimportant.

Both realities are correct. Both can coexist as long as I understand that I didn’t create me; HASHEM did. HASHEM may have put me into a position of power and greatness, but it has nothing to do with me. While I temporarily hold that position, I must act with due deference to my station in life. However, I am neither the creator of it, nor will I occupy it forever. This is the balance between the extraordinary greatness of man and a healthy dose of humility.

The only human who reached a true understanding of this dichotomy was Moshe Rabbeinu. The Torah tells us that “the man Moshe was very humble, more so than any other person on the face of the earth” (Bamidbar 12:3). Yet Moshe knew his worth. He was completely cognizant of his position and his power. HASHEM said to write the word “VaYikrah” with an aleph, but Moshe didn’t want to. HASHEM told him to do it anyway, and still Moshe felt that it wasn’t proper, so he stood up to HASHEM himself, and said, “You put me in this position, and You authorized me to be a factor in defining the transmission of Torah. I am exercising that right You have given me. I am going to write it — but it will be small.” This is a fabulous illustration of towering humility balanced with a courage and fortitude that comes from knowing one’s position.
This perception is very applicable in our times. Most people struggle with either a poor self-image or an inflated sense of self. Either that inner voice says, “I am worthless. What can I accomplish anyway? How much can be expected of me?” or it speaks out, “Do you know who I am? Do you know how great I am? Do you know how weighty, mighty and significant I am?” Both of these extremes are false. The correct understanding is that HASHEM created me and put me into a position where I can shape worlds. Born into this thing called a human body, I have extraordinary potential and capacities. It was worthy of creating all of the cosmos for me alone. And at the same time, I am but that little guy inside. I am the crane operator. Understanding this balance allows us to recognize our significance and at the same time remain grounded. I was created in the image of HASHEM, but at the end of the day I am but a creation — and HASHEM is my Creator.

Are You a Bull Or a Lamb?
By Rabbi Yossy Goldman

Not only animal-rights groups have difficulty with this week’s Parshah; many if not most people in our modern era have a problem with the whole concept of animal sacrifice, which is a major theme of the third book of the Torah, Leviticus.

But I have no wish to enter into a rationalization of biblical morality. The second verse in the book lends itself to some interesting homiletic interpretation, which makes it quite clear that the Torah’s focus on sacrifice is not so much on the animal on the altar as on the person who is offering it:

*When a man (adam) will bring an offering from among you to G-d, from the animals, from the cattle or from the flock shall you bring your offering.* (Leviticus 1:2)

Now, clearly, the language here is rather strained. In fact, most translators have edited the text to read more smoothly: “When a man among you will bring an offering,” clearly an improvement in the flow of the verse.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, in his classic *Likkutei Torah*, insists however that the Torah’s syntax is deliberate. “When a man will bring an offering”—i.e., he will want to come closer to G-d (the Hebrew word *korban* has in it the root *karav*, “to come close”), then he must know that the offering must come “from you,” from the animal within you.

Every one of us possesses animalistic tendencies, and these must be consumed on the altar of G-d. We are obliged to slay our inner animal, and humanize ourselves by working on developing our character traits, until the beast within us has been neutralized—and better yet, sanctified.

What exactly does this mean? The verse continues, “from the cattle or from the flock, shall you bring your offering.” An individual may behave like “cattle,” a goring bull, trampling on everyone and everything in its way. He is the proverbial bull in a china closet, stomping, aggressive, bullying, domineering, and utterly insensitive to people’s feelings.

Others might be like “the flock”—the meek little lamb that timidly follows the crowd. He has no opinion of his own; whatever the last person he spoke to said becomes his opinion for the moment. He has no backbone, no sense of self or self-respect. He stays with the flock at all costs, lest he be labeled a “black sheep.”

Still others might be moody and temperamental, changing colors and character traits from day to day. One minute they might be like the raging bull, and the next, the docile lamb.

So the Torah teaches us to be *adam*, a human being of human—indeed, G-dly—character. Be a man, not an ox; a lady, not a lamb. Be a *mentsch*; behave like a mature, refined person, not like a *vilde chayah* (wild animal). Examine your own behavioral tendencies; check out your inner feelings and dispositions. Are you satisfied with yourself as a human being? Are those around you happy, or do you intimidate them with your temper tantrums? Are you mature and mild-mannered, or do you suffer from road rage?

Searching our souls and our inner psyches for unacceptable behaviors, and then doing something about it, is what we mean when we say to bring the animal up on the altar of sacrifice. It is the animal within each of us. The true and ultimate sacrifice is the sacrificing of self.
“Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem, from animals –from the cattle or from the flock shall you bring your offering” (1:2)

The first posuk that the Torah describes is קרבן, which is brought voluntarily by an individual. The Steipler Gaon writes that the idea of a voluntary קרבן is for a person to come closer to Hashem. There are many different paths that a person can take in order to train himself to love Hashem. Rambam writes that a person achieves this by meditating on Hashem’s greatness. Chovos Halevavos says that one develops a love for Hashem by focusing on His tremendous kindness. A third way is to give of oneself to Hashem. This act helps a person create the love of Hashem within himself. Even if he does not yet feel this inspiration in his heart, the performance of the action that involves giving will help him reach that point. The more mitzvos one does the more he fans the flame of inspiration within him. In this way, a voluntary mitzvah is even greater than a regular mitzvah that one is obligated to perform. A person who is uninspired should still try to do positive things of his own accord because through going ahead and giving of himself, he makes his own inspiration.

The posuk literally means "when a person brings from yourself." What does this mean? The Seforno writes: When a person brings a sacrifice, he must bring from himself as well by humbling himself and confessing his sins. Hashem does not want the sacrifice without the humility of the person. One must give of himself to Hashem by repenting and lowering himself. The sacrifices are only a vehicle that helps facilitate repentance. A sacrifice without the humbling thoughts alongside it loses its true purpose. Although we do not have sacrifices today, we still have the main part of the sacrifices, the repentance that goes along with it. As we read the chapters dealing with sacrifices in the upcoming weeks, we should realize that we can still achieve atonement through repentance. That is what we must focus on today. Hopefully, the reading of these parshiyos will heighten the awareness within us of what our responsibility to do teshuva really demands of us.

“You shall salt your every meal-offering with salt; you may not discontinue the salt of your G-d’s covenant from upon your meal-offering –on every offering shall you offer salt” (2:13)

What is the significance of placing salt on every קרבן? The Kli Yakar explains that salt is a single entity that is created through the combination of two complete opposites: fire and water. Although these two usually cannot co-exist, when the heat of the sun evaporates seawater, salt is left behind. The idea of including salt with every קרבן represents the idea that while we may see good and bad things happen in our lives and the world around us and it seems that there are two opposite forces at work, we must realize that everything comes from Hashem alone. Just as salt is one item that contains two opposites, we acknowledge with each קרבן that every aspect of our lives, both good and bad, is governed by Hashem and happens for a purpose.

“If the anointed Kohen will sin, bringing guilt upon the people; for his sin that he committed he shall offer a young bull, unblemished, to Hashem as a sin-offering” (4:3)

R’ Yaakov MiLisa, the author of Nesivos HaMishpat (a famous commentary on Choshen Mishpat), writes that when the Kohen Gadol sins, even unintentionally, it brings guilt upon all the people because he is a leader who is looked up to. When the people see what he does, they assume that they can do the same and this leads them to sin intentionally and sink to a lower level. Such a person has to be doubly careful not to stumble in sin and to be extra mindful even of sinning accidentally. This applies to all those who bear the name of Hashem. Anyone who is looked at as a religious person has to realize that others are constantly looking at him and learning from his behavior. We have to be aware of the influence that we have on others and go out of our way to be sure not to adversely influence others through our actions and our manner of speech. As much power as we have to be a good influence on others, we can also easily cause people to become even worse with just one misstep. It is a tremendous responsibility that we have to be aware of at all times.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman
I don’t know about you, but when a global pandemic hits that fundamentally alters our daily life, the part of the Torah I look to for guidance is … the meal offerings. Wait, what? Seems a bit anticlimactic.

In truth, however, some of the Torah’s most seemingly subtle passages offer great depth and insight. This pasuk describes some of the requirements of bringing meal offerings, which are composed of nothing more than wheat flour, oil and frankincense. Very often, the individual bringing such an offering was poor and therefore could not bring an offering of any type of animal. In our current state of affairs, this should be a clue for us all to devote ourselves to helping those around us, no matter how much we are struggling, because, let’s face it, we are all going through hardships right now of one sort or another. Even if all you can do is something small, like delivering food to an elderly neighbor, then even that is something great that will earn God’s favor.

The pasuk also specifies that the offerings are to be unleavened. In a few weeks, we will eat the ultimate unleavened food — matzo. We are taught that the lack of leaven is a metaphor for humility — all the substance but without the hot air. Right now, it’s not about you. It’s about everyone in our society. It’s about doing what is necessary without regard for our own egos or opinions. Ultimately, we’ll all get through this together.

By Justin Levi

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Sacrifices and the coronavirus
By Michael R. Mantell, Ph.D.

For you accountants out there, this parasha has more letters and words than any other weekly reading, 6,222 Hebrew letters, and 1,673 Hebrew words. During this time of uncertainty, anxiety, concern, fear and worry that so many feel, like every week, this wordy parasha comes at just the right time.

Yes, we can delve into all of the different types of animal and meal sacrifices and offerings we learn about, including the “olah” or “ascending offerings,” the “minchah” or “meal offerings,” the “shelamim” or “peace offering,” the “chatat” or different types of “sin offerings,” and the “asham” or “guilt offering.” But perhaps there’s more to this than digging deeply into something that on the surface doesn’t resonate easily with most of us. What does make sense to us, especially now, is connecting with Hashem, finding Him in the current “coronapocalypse.” That’s the link with these sacrifices.

Sacrifices, from the array listed in Vayikra to the seemingly bothersome and emotionally difficult sacrifices we make in self-quarantining, isolating, and the myriad of steps we take to place our health and safety as top priorities in life at this time, are about connecting to Hashem – when seen through the right lens. When processed properly, the current seeming decline we are living through may not be a setback at all, but rather just the lens, the momentum, we need to better understand our falls, bring us into more fruitful encounters with each other, and help refine the nature of our collective humanity, and IY’H, bring us closer to Hashem.

Nearly everyone is in some level of emotional and mental distress over what is happening. We all need to answer the call of Vayikra. Learning Torah and doing mitzvot, engaging in prayer, were met with imprisonment, torture and death in days past. Staying positive during a crisis such as we are facing takes courage, some say “living in a bubble.” The parasha tells us the power of sacrifice brings the strength to never give up, to always come closer, to avoid despair.

We see the sense of gratitude that one brings with sacrifices, indeed, our prayers, our modern day sacrifices, are filled with deep gratitude. We thank Hashem from the moment we open our eyes in the morning, with Modeh Ani. From the blessings we say every morning thanking Hashem for a myriad of gifts, to Birkat Hamazon for our food, blessings when seeing beauty, coming upon a wise person, hearing thunder, seeing an unusual creature, for our good health, upon completing a journey, for our parents and children, for our learning and our accomplishments, often things we take for granted, we recognize the Hand of God continually in the divine gift of our life. The parasha tells us the rituals, the sacrifices, are a pipeline to Hashem. We need this reminder, this conduit, now, perhaps more than ever in our blessed lives. Our rabbis in Midrash Rabbah tell us kol ha’nesshama is better read as kol ha’nesshima, with each breath we are wise to praise God. The COVID19 virus reminds us of the irrereplaceable gift of our respirations.

Let’s use our breath, our Heavenly endowment, without taking even one for granted, to sing the praises of Hashem, especially during this threat to our health and wellbeing. When we use our prayers, our gratitude, our contemporary sacrifices in this manner, we see His hand in our lives. Vayikra, “And He called…” and He is calling to us through the COVID19 challenge. Let’s answer with thanks and sacrificial prayer that all come through this time healthier, closer and strengthened.
God is Not in Quarantine

by Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Public Health experts are guiding us that the key to slowing down, if not stopping, the spread of this virus is social distancing, a term and a practice that should be an anathema to us. We generally draw strength from togetherness and unity and yet, during these extraordinary times, the best way to show that we are together is to be willing to remain apart.

However, while we are distancing, God is breaking quarantine everywhere. In difficult moments and crises like these, we have a choice to make. We can focus on this horrific virus, those it has struck, and wonder, “Where is God?” or we can look at how we are collectively responding, keep an eye on the extraordinary things that are happening, and find Him everywhere.

God is found through His heroic angels, the doctors, nurses and custodians caring for people in hospitals and nursing homes. He is found through the network of special volunteers, His angels who are eager to check in on the homebound and deliver provisions to the vulnerable. You can see Him through the generosity of those angels digging deep into their own pockets to ensure that those hit hardest can continue to be safe and taken care of.

These acts of kindness, this attitude of cooperation and collaboration, these gestures of selflessness are indeed expressions of Godliness, come from the spirit of God that is found within each and every one of us.

God is also found in the blessings He continues to bestow upon us, even during these challenging times. He can be found through the technology which enables us to remain in touch, to videoconference hundreds around the world. He can be found through apps, websites and emails that empower us to continue learning Torah together and to pray together, to sing together, prepare for Shabbos together and to learn how to prepare for Passover together.

Make no mistake, even during this outbreak, God can still be found in the rising and setting of the sun, in the beautiful trees and plants, in the intricate ordinary functions of the human body.

Indeed, God can be found in literally each and every breath that we take. The book of Psalms concludes with the sentence, Kol Ha’Neshama tehalleil Kah, every soul must praise God. Our rabbis (Midrash Rabbah) tell us, don’t read it as kol ha’neshama, every soul, but kol ha’neshima, with each breath, we must praise God. Rav Chaim Kanievsky explains that as long as a person has breath in his lungs, as long as we can still speak, we must never stop recognizing God everywhere and we must continuously praise Him.

The Chasam Sofer has a beautiful and particularly timely explanation. He says, kol ha’neshima means praise God not with every breath, but because of every breath we take. A healthy person breathes 12 – 20 times a minute and doesn’t think about it even once. Breathing is a natural, automated action. We take it for granted and not only expect the next breath to come; we don’t even think about it. And yet, there are countless factors, intricate mechanics that are necessary for each breath. The coronavirus attacks the respiratory system; it makes it difficult for those who have it to breathe, even forcing some to be placed on a ventilator. This virus should remind us that there is nothing ordinary, predictable or expected about breathing. We aren’t entitled to this great gift and blessing, and so kol ha’neshima, with each and every breath we take, we should acknowledge, thank and sing praise to God.

God is not quarantined; He isn’t distancing Himself from any of us. In fact, He can be found all around us, through His angels, through the blessings we receive and through each breath we take.

While physically distancing is what is necessary to remain safe, drawing close to God at this time is what we need to not only survive, but to thrive, spiritually. God doesn’t quarantine, He never needs a hazmat suit and being near Him doesn’t pose a threat or danger. You can shake His hand and lean in to feel His hug, welcoming His embrace.

As we work to stop coronavirus, let’s make a concerted effort to pay attention to God all around us, within us and through us. Let’s be His angels to help others, let’s pause to thank Him for the blessings we still have and let’s pray with all our concentration and might that He bring only good health and safety for all of us.