

From sacrifice to kiruv

THIS week's parashah is an animal rights activist's nightmare. It explains the nature and method of sacrifices and goes into the gory details such as how to sprinkle the blood, and where.

I will not even attempt to explain the purpose of sacrifices, since for some they are “chukim”, laws without apparent reason but ones that only the Divine understands. To quote from a popular television series, for humans to understand sacrifices would be equivalent to getting a dog to understand the concept of Norway.

For some, sacrifices are to provide something of monetary value, and therefore loss, to the Divine and thus teach humans about value. Others hold the view that sacrifices are (literally) a scapegoat for our own sins and involve a spiritual transfer of transgression. Regardless, in the Torah there is something to learn from every aspect.

The second sentence of the parashah instructs man to offer a sacrifice (and it is assumed that the sacrifice is a kosher animal), and it goes on to say that the sacrifice should be “from the cattle or the flock”. This reinforces the view that the sacrifices must be from our own personal possessions (and we therefore mourn, even if only financially, its absence) but specifying “cattle or the flock” is intriguing.

Torah topic

ויקרא

JEREMY STOWE-LINDNER



It reminds me of the bear and bull markets of the stock exchange, one representing a falling market and the other a rising market. Each animal has particular characteristics that conjure differing emotions.

What is the nature of cattle? Cattle can be bullish, literally, aggressive and pushy. Conversely, the flock – lamb, sheep and so on – conjures images of docility, placidity and being a follower rather than a leader.

These are images of extremes, but we also know that in a herd of cattle a cow can be un-bull-like, gentle and passive. Likewise, a ram in a flock of sheep can be the opposite of the flock's stereotype: aggressive and impulsive.

So it is with our own choices. We may have the innate characteristics of one extreme or another, but we are capable of tempering our own personalities, adapting and therefore demonstrating flexibility and compassion.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman tells us that the word for sacrifice, “korban”, has as its root, “karev”, as in “to bring closer”. Indeed, those who bring others closer to Judaism are said to

be involved in “kiruv”. So a key message of the sacrifices is, like the modern-day prayer services that replicate their regularity, to bring us closer to the Divine.

The sacrifices of biblical Israel would have been unlike our stereotypical services of today. Bloody, dramatic, loud and inclusive, they would have been dramatic showcases of crowd-awing theatre.

The prayer services of today can be exciting, inclusive, songful and spiritual – but they can also be exclusive, long, boring and repetitive. Some communities throughout the denominational range in Melbourne are experimenting with prayer, especially for children and young adults, to see how within their own frameworks of halachah (Jewish law) and philosophy they can replicate some of the drama and excitement of the spiritual services of old. These communities are being very successful in bringing members of the community together, and connected with the Divine, through prayer.

Fortunately they are not extending their remit to sacrifices! However, “kiruv”, or outreach, is successful when our “korbanot” (sacrifices) or those prayer rituals that replace them are speaking to the needs of the people who they are intended to serve.

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner is principal of Bialik College.