

From sacrifice to prayer

FOR those familiar with the Indiana Jones movies, sacrifices will be a run-of-the-mill part of storytelling. In a very different vein, the Torah outlines in great details the sacrifices that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem. This week's parashah, Vayikra, is a crucial part of that narrative.

Aside from the lambs offered as a public sacrifice each morning and evening, sacrifices ranged from mincha offerings of flour and oil, to chatat (for atonement), shelamim (for peace – a popular sacrifice due in no small part to the fact that the person who brought the sacrifice could eat part of it themselves) and the asham (for certain sins) and so on.

Sacrifices stopped when the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70CE, although they briefly resumed some 60 years later during what the Romans called the Jewish War (because it was against Jews) but we call the Roman War (for obvious reasons) or the Bar Kokhba revolt.

Besides the fact that the Mosque of Omar has been built on the very spot where sacrifices took place, sacrifices are a thing of the past, and without the rebuilding of the

Torah topic

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Temple during a future Messianic era, they are unlikely to return soon. So why focus on them? Why don't we gloss over Vayikra because it doesn't appear to have a message, a story or a theme that we can relate to?

Admittedly Vayikra is a little more legalistic, formulaic and turgid than many other parashiyot (the ten plagues, the flood and creation are, after all, difficult to compete with), but nevertheless there is wisdom and depth in every word.

In our tradition, we pray in place of sacrifices. The prophet Hosea (14:3) told us that we offer our lips rather than bullocks. In the book of Melachim (Kings), while dedicating his new Temple, Solomon himself says that instead of sacrifices, we should pray “toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the Temple I have built for your Name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and

their plea, and uphold their cause” (I Kings 8:48-9).

Sacrifices were conducted thrice daily, as reflected by the more modern institution of praying three times per day. The timing of the prayers corresponds to the timing of the sacrifices. Just as prayer is reflective of so many different needs – self-fulfilment, assistance, reflection, atonement – so were sacrifices brought for festivals, for praise, for thanks, for cleansing and so on.

There is no doubting that prayer is hard work. Just as different people developed an affinity for different sacrifices, so do we as congregants develop affinities for different types of prayer. From mainstream shul services to spiritual services such as Spiritgrow, from musical services such as Kehilat Kolenu to denominational services, from private to public prayer, we are fortunate to have a community of many colours and faces, providing opportunities for spiritual fulfilment in many forms.

Who needs a bullock when we have lips?

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