Tzav: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

God commands Moses to instruct Aaron and his sons in the duties of the priests. This includes the fire on the altar, which must be burning at all times, and the korbanot, or animal and meal offerings. The laws of eating the offerings are explained, and **Aaron and his sons remain inside the Sanctuary compound for seven days as Moses initiates them into the priesthood**.



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"The fire used to kindle the lamps of the Candelabrum, which must be lit regularly, must burn upon the Altar. The fire on the Altar must not go out."

Take a deeper dive

How to begin and approach our parsha, the second in the book of Vayikra, or Leviticus? When asked this same question, the writer Herman Wouk mused that if anyone was ever to adapt the Torah into a blockbuster Hollywood film, it's likely that Leviticus would remain on the cutting room floor.

This is especially true considering that the singular subject, more or less, of our parsha is the one that is probably the least appetizing to modern sensibilities: Sacrifices. More specifically, animal sacrifices.

Why should we bother with this stuff? After all, not only have sacrifices been obsolete for thousands of years—the last one occurred sometime in the year 70 A.D., before the Temple burned down—but our very own prophets, like Jeremiah, sometimes seemed to criticize the practice. **So why should we moderns spend any time reading about animal sacrifice?**

To answer the question, we must first understand what sacrifices are all about. The Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, comes from the root *k.r.v*, which means proximate or nearby. To offer a *korban*, therefore, is to come closer to God, an act of intimacy and tenderness. "Sacrifice," as the late, great Rabbi Sacks explained, "is the choreography of love."

That's not a very difficult concept for us to understand. If we've ever been married, or, say, had children, we understand very well that the greatest kind of love, the kind that accelerates us and makes life worth living, involves deep and real and often difficult sacrifices.

But our parsha goes much deeper than that. Before we offer a new sacrifice, it instructs us, we must first clear the altar. And this, the rabbis teach us, offers us two key ideas. First, the proper and ritualistic disposal of the burnt offerings is a way of connecting past and future, yesterday and today. We don't just rid ourselves of the remains of the great fire that burnt bright last night, because to do so would be to diminish the memory of its greatness and meaning. Instead, we take the time to remind ourselves how bright and great it was, solemnly sweeping its remains while taking the time to recall how we felt when it was still burning. This is a warning against a life consisting of short bursts of enthusiasm followed by cooling off, quieting down, giving up. It's a process of keeping great and blessed conflagration alive in our hearts for as long as possible. And second, the ritualistic cleaning up serves another important purpose. We can't begin to worship HaShem properly until the altar is clean. **And just as we can't place new offerings on top of filthy ashes, so we can't pray or practice until our hearts have been cleansed and purified.**

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook addressed this second point in his masterwork, *Orot HaTeshuva*. "Teshuva," or repentance, he writes, "is the soul feeling healthier. A healthy soul in a healthy body is a requirement if we're ever to feel the great joy of teshuva, and it stirs the greatest of natural pleasures. Just as the corporeal body must dispose of waste in order to remain healthy and whole, so, too, must the soul empty itself of evil deeds, bad impressions, and malfunctions within, empty itself of each and every wicked thought that drives it further from the grace of God." Amen to that.

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