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I love gadgets. I love knowing how all of the features of a gadget work. I actually read the manual for my cell phone. I would read computer manuals to learn all of the new features of that piece of software. It was always exciting to learn what I could accomplish with a new gadget. It might even be something that I did not know that I wanted to accomplish. In last week's double Torah portion, Vayakhel-Pekudei, B'nai Yisrael gets the ultimate new gadget: the Mishkan.

We read about the artists completing the Mishkan and Moses setting it up for the first time. When Moses put that final piece in the Mishkan, God's Kavod (which is probably the cloud that has accompanied them since they left Egypt) fills the Mishkan. Without interruption, the book of Vayikra begins with God calling to Moses from that Tent, and God gives Moses the instruction manual for the Mishkan.

Great! Back in the day, we had the manual, and we knew what to do. For a while. The Mishkan was eventually transferred to the permanent site of the Beit Mikdash in Jerusalem. Then the Babylonians destroyed the Beit Mikdash, but we got by. We rebuilt. The Second Beit Mikdash was destroyed by the Romans, and this time there was no third Beit Mikdash in sight. We have Vayikra and no Beit Mikdash. An instruction manual and no gadget!

What was the Mishkan for anyway? Was it just a way to kill animals for God's pleasure? What did God expect Israel to do with this thing? What goals was the Mishkan helping us accomplish, and what we do have that can help us accomplish those same goals?

This parshah, Vayikra, is an overview of the five main types of offerings made in the Mishkan, called *korbanot*, which comes from the Hebrew root 'to come close.' Words built upon this root are all over the place in Vayikra. *Korbanot* are about people coming close to something else or someone else. Reading the verses in Vayikra closely, one can see that the *korbanot* are all about maintaining a close bond with God, other people and one's self. Let's take a look at some of the key passages from Vayikra the focus on those relationships:

“He shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering (*olah*), that it may be acceptable in his behalf, in expiation for him...It is a burnt offering, an offering by fire, of pleasing odor to YHVH” (Vayikra 1:4, 17)

The first type of offering is called on *olah*, which can be a bull, sheep, goat, or pigeon or dove or even flour and oil, depending on one's personal means. Expiation means to make amends for wrongdoing. Unlike other types of offering, the *olah* is completely burned up

by the fire. No one eats any of it. The *olah* is a freely given offering that one would bring to strengthen one's relationship with God.

The flour and oil offering has its own name as well, which is a *minchah* offering. The term *minchah* is a special term that is used to denote a gift that acknowledges the recipient as being the superior in the relationship. It is significant that the Rabbis named the afternoon service (*Minchah*) after this type of offering. For the Rabbis, this prayer affirms our dependence on God's gifts.

"If his offering is a sacrifice of well-being (*zevach shlamim*).” (Vayikra 3:1)

The third type of offering, called a *zevach shlamim* from the Hebrew root meaning 'peace or whole', brings up the possibility that one could bring an offering as an expression of joy, gratitude or relief. Only the blood and certain fatty portions of a *zevach shlamim* were burned up. The rest was eaten as a festive meal in God's presence. The Pesach offering was one kind of a *zevach shlamim*. This type of sacred festive meal served to strengthen bonds of family and friendship, as well as to express gratitude to God for a joyous occasion.

The two final types of offerings in Vayikra are the *hattat* and the *asham*, each of which is brought when someone makes a mistake:

"When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of YHVH's commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them...If it is the kohen...If it is the whole community...If it is the leader of the people...If any person from among the population unwittingly incurs guilt...the kohen shall make expiation on his behalf for the sin of which he is guilty, and he shall be forgiven.” (Vayikra 4:2-3, 13, 22, 27, 35)

The *asham* is for a more serious level of guilt, such as telling a lie in court, contact with a dead carcass, violating an oath, or using something that had been made sacred by dedication to God. When someone brings an *asham*: "The kohen shall make expiation in his behalf before YHVH, and he shall be forgiven for whatever he may have done to draw blame thereby.” (Vayikra 5:26)

The *asham* and the *hattat* are about dealing with the damage that can come from a mistake, personal or national, minor or serious. The *zevach shlamim* is about celebrating gratitude and joy with others. The *minchah* is about acknowledging our dependence on God. The *olah* is about strengthening our relationship with God.

Vayikra demonstrates that the *korbanot* are about strengthening our relationship to God, each other and to ourselves. The Rabbis understood that this was what we were to accomplish with the *korbanot*, and struggled with the same question that everyone had after the destruction of the Beit Mikdash: Now what?

One of the early Rabbis, Shimon Hatzadik, had a very specific idea about what to do to accomplish these goals: He said, "Upon three things the world stands: upon Torah, upon Service and upon Acts of Loving-kindness.”

Rabbi Shimon's teaching shows us that we can accomplish these same goals with these three key elements of Jewish life. Torah study can strengthen our relationship to God and to those whom with we study. Service, which in Hebrew is *Avodah*, can be *tefillah*, prayer. Through *Tefillah*, we can connect to God, those we pray with and ourselves. Acts of Loving-kindness, such as celebrating with a bride and groom, comforting mourners, helping others, visiting the sick and so on, also serve to strengthen all of those same relationships.

In the end, the question is: So what is Judaism all about? Making better people. Whether it was through *korbanot* or Torah, *Tefillah* and Acts of Loving-kindness, if by doing them we come out on the other end as more caring, responsible people, it is good.

Shabbat Shalom,
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AS A FAMILY:

1. Set regular times with your family to do Torah study, attend service together and do acts of loving-kindness together. See what happens.
2. Talk with your family about the *korbanot* and talk about what it might have been like to offer a *korban*. What would the experience have been like? Use your imagination.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION VAYIKRA, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. Which offering was considered the most holy and why?
2. What ingredients are specifically mentioned as being omitted from all meal offerings? Was honey permitted? Why or why not? Was salt permitted? Why or why not?
3. For a peace offering of the herd, was the animal supposed to be male or female?
4. What was done with the fat and blood from these sacrifices?
5. What is the Hebrew word for "meal offering"?
6. Why did the person bringing a sacrifice place his hands on the head of the animal?
7. Who was it that actually slaughtered an animal brought as a sacrifice? Was it a Kohen or was it the person who brought the animal? How does this change the experience?
8. If someone caused a loss to the Sanctuary by unintentionally taking a holy thing for his/her use, what was the required sacrifice?
9. In the beginning of this parashah, from where did God's voice come when speaking to Moses?