

## Vayikra 2023

### The Heart of Worship

3 minute read | Straightforward

Prayer is a central aspect of Judaism, if not all religious beliefs. It is an invocation or act that deliberately seeks out and interfaces with the divine.

Although prayer does appear obliquely or sporadically in the Torah, it is not the predominant mode of worship in the Torah or the ancient world the Torah appeared in, an era where animal sacrifice was a near cultural universal. Our sages went out of their way to teach that prayer doesn't just appear in the Torah; prayer stands in as a direct replacement or substitute for the lapsed sacrifices of long ago.

Our prayers are replete with requests to restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Beis HaMikdash. However, authorities are divided on whether the future we yearn for heralds a restoration or replacement of animal sacrifice. While that remains speculative until we find out, it is probably fair to say that it is hard for people in the modern world to wrap their heads around animal sacrifice.

Today's near cultural universal is that animal sacrifice is alien and weird, perhaps even disgusting and nasty. Most people don't want to watch an animal get slaughtered; any arcane mysticism is hard to imagine over the blood and gore.

That leaves prayer in a bit of a void; prayer is a stand-in or substitute for animal sacrifice, and yet an animal sacrifice is hard to relate to in almost every conceivable way, so far removed as it is from our primary experience. Moreover, the Torah has long sections devoted to the different categories and kinds of sacrifice and their details and nuances; sacrifice is clearly the primary mode of worship in the Torah's conception, so prayer seems second-rate.

Either way, prayer is hard to understand. If prayer and sacrifice aren't connected, why bother with something the Torah doesn't validate as having much significance? And if prayer is connected to sacrifice, what element of sacrifice do we even relate to?

The Torah opens the section on sacrifices by outlining a scenario where someone wants to bring an offering:

אָדָם בְּיִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֶרְבָּן לַיהוָה – When one of you presents an offering for God... (1:2)

Although not readily obvious in translation, the Torah utilizes highly unusual language here. Rather than present the sensible scenario where one of you wants to bring an offering, it literally translates to when someone offers an offering of you, which is to say, literally of yourselves – אָדָם מִכֶּם בְּיִקְרִיב / אָדָם בְּיִקְרִיב מִכֶּם.



The Baal HaTanya notes that this reading suggests that at the earliest juncture, the Torah already indicates that as much it's going to talk about animal offerings, it's not about the animal at all; it's about the part of yourself you're willing to offer, and prayer would operate in much the same way – יְקָרִיב מִכֶּם.

R' Jonathan Sacks teaches that the conventional notion of sacrifice isn't really reflected in the Hebrew term – קָרְבָּן. We think of sacrifice as giving something up when the Hebrew word actually means something more like drawing closer – קָרַב. You interact with the divine not with what you give up but by drawing close with what you have; in offering the material to God, you transform the material into the sacred.

God doesn't need our stuff and can't receive it in any tangible way; the Malbim teaches that all a person can ever offer is themselves, which mirrors precisely what the Torah calls for here – יְקָרִיב מִכֶּם. The Sfas Emes explains that the notion articulated here is that sacrifice and prayer are about aligning ourselves and resources to God's broader plan; prayer isn't secondary to sacrifice; it is the same.

While the form of seeking out the divine may have changed over time depending on the zeitgeist, the substance has remained constant. At the root of all mysticism is a desire to connect with the divine transcendence, and our sages have long identified the inner world of the heart as the battlefield of spirituality – עֲבוּדָה שְׂבִלֵב. So we can read the Yom Kippur atonement ritual that seems odd to modern sensibilities, yet it maintains relevance to our prayers because the substance transcends the form of the performative aspect; that God forgives humans who want to make amends, goats and string or not.

It's not the form of how it appears so much as it's about the substance of how it is – אַחַד הַמֵּרְבֵּה וְאַחַד וְאַחַד הַמִּמְעֵיט וּבִלְבַד שִׁיכוּיִן לְבוֹ לַשְּׁמַיִם.

As Moshe said to his audience, our Creator is always close, quite different from other gods they might have heard of who can only be invoked with specific rituals – כִּי מִיִּגְוֵי גְדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ אֱלֹהִים קְרָבִים אֵלָיו כֹּה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ – בְּכָל־קְרָאֵנוּ אֵלָיו.

The Izhbitzer suggests that our subconscious hearts and minds hope and pray all the time. When you whisper “Please, God,” hope for the best, or wish that things turn out okay, those unspoken but very real thoughts are prayers that bring tangible wisps of warmth into the world that affirm and sustain, from which things can and will eventually grow – קָרוֹב ה' לְכָל קְרָאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יְקָרְאֵהוּ בְּאַמֶּת.

As the Kotzker said, where can we find God? Wherever we let Him in.

Sacrifice, like prayer, was always about the inner world of the spirit, about opening your heart and yourself to the universe.

And prayer, like sacrifice, can't change God; but it can change you.



## Come As You Are

3 minute read | Straightforward

We often think of holiness or sanctity as the hallowed privilege of a rare few, the people who have made it, the inner circle of those who are better and wiser than us. They are the ones who can pray for us, guide us, and bring healing. Sometimes that's true; other times, that view is propounded by self-righteous, holier-than-thou folks who self-serve by making us feel that way.

That being said, it is an objective and measurable fact that some people are further on their religious journey and are more advanced on the observance spectrum.

Make no mistake that everyone has the same obligation to meet the standard of perfect observance of the Torah – so, for example, the Torah unambiguously says to keep Shabbos with no exceptions.

Yet, in the external world where theory meets practice, achieving perfection is neither possible nor actual; that standard has only ever been theoretical. We ought to know better than to hold every human to the same standard.

The only uniform standard everyone is mandated to uphold is the half-shekel donation to the Mishkan, the tiniest sum of money, a de minimis threshold contribution. This contribution went towards the foundation sockets, which compare to our threshold foundation of faith and membership of the Jewish People.

But beyond that basic common and tiny denominator, everyone is radically different. Everyone is born in a particular environment, makes mistakes, and is only capable of so much or going so far. We know this intuitively – it is clear that, like all things in life, there must be a subjective element to religiosity by necessity, and there is.

In as much as sacrifices and the Beis HaMikdash are the domain of the privileged few, every single human may bring an offering. One form explicitly recognizes human subjectivity and meets us where we are, contingent on a person's means – קרבן עולה ויורד. While a wealthy person would bring expensive cattle, a working person would be expected to offer a pair of affordable birds, and a person in poverty would only have to provide some cheap flour:

וְאִם לֹא תִשָּׂיג יָדוֹ לְשֵׁתֵי תְרִים אוֹ לְשֵׁנֵי בְנֵי־יוֹנָה וְהָבִיא אֶת־קֶרְבְּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר תִּטָּא עֲשִׂירַת הָאָפֶה סֵלֶת – And if one's means do not suffice for two turtledoves or two pigeons, that person shall bring as an offering for that of which one is guilty a tenth of an ephah of choice flour... (5:11)

Whatever the form, the result is a “pleasant scent,” which is how the Torah describes God receiving them warmly – רִיחַ נִיחֹחַ לֵה'. This is quite obviously a metaphor; burning feathers smell disgusting. And yet unmistakably, the same reception reveals that whatever the form, they are substantively the same,



whether bull, bird, or flour; all are warmly embraced, with no distinction between rich and poor – נאמר – בעוף ריה ניהוח ונאמר בבהמה ריה ניהוח, לומר לך אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

The Chafetz Chaim notes that the principle holds even while the sacrifices have lapsed. If you have the means to help others and do less than you could, you need to step up and meet your duty. To whom much is given, much is expected, and with great power comes great responsibility.

The legendary Reb Zusha of Hanipol would say that when he'd get to Heaven, he wouldn't be afraid to answer why he wasn't like Avraham, because he wasn't Avraham, nor why he wasn't like Moshe, because he wasn't Moshe. But when they would ask why he wasn't like Zusha, he'd have no answer for failing to live up to his unique potential.

As much as we all need to be better, you can only move forward from where you are. You are in the right place to do what you need to – המקום אשר אתה עומד עליו אדמת-קדש הוא –

One of the most powerful phrases in the Torah is when God saw the young Yishmael dying in the desert. The Midrash imagines the angels arguing against divine intervention to save Yishmael because of the atrocities his descendants would commit, but they lose the argument because God evaluates things differently. God answers the boy based on where he is and the facts and circumstances as they are here and now – באשר הוא שם –

In your present condition and natural state, you have a key stake in Judaism and a contribution to make that matters, even before the changes you must still undergo.

You are where you're supposed to be right now, and you are enough.

---

## **The Eternal Flame**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The ancients understood that water is the source of life, that rain and water are life-giving, and that water symbolizes cleansing, regeneration, renewal, fertility, birth, creation, and new life.

Rain is a powerful symbol in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people; unlike Egypt, where the water comes up from the Nile and beneath people's toes, Israel is a land where people must raise their eyes and thoughts to the heavens for rain.

Given rain's prominent role in the agricultural world of our ancestors, it follows that rain features prominently in our daily prayers – משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם –

But once a year, there was a distinctly unique prayer featuring rain.

The Kohen Gadol would enter the inner sanctum of the Beis HaMikdash on Yom Kippur, perform the ritual service, and say one single prayer, the only prayer ever uttered at Judaism's holiest site. A lot of it was about rain.

Given the heavy agricultural dependency, we might reasonably expect the religious leader and representative of the entire generation to request the right amount of rain at the appropriate time and place, and it does.

But one line of the prayer confounds our expectations.

The prayer asks God to ignore the prayers of travelers who don't want to get wet along the way - וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח לְפָנֶיךָ תְּפִלַּת עוֹבְרֵי דְרָכִים.

It's arguably the most important day and ritual of the year; if we had to nominate one significant thing to pray for, we might think of several. But even if we have understood how rain is of vital importance, why would ignoring travelers be the single most important thing we have to say about it?

The Alter of Kelm notes how powerful a fervent and heartfelt prayer must be to require counteraction by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies; even when it is transparently self-serving and contrary to the needs of the entire people at large.

But perhaps this prayer also reveals a worldview on how to think about the things we need most.

There is an interesting directive in the laws of sacrifices about a fire that had to burn in all weather conditions; even the rain:

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תִּהְיֶה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֵה – Burn an eternal flame on the altar, it can never burn out... (6:6)

On its face, this is a simple instruction to the attending Kohanim on duty to regularly stoke and fuel the flame so it would never burn out.

There was nothing magical about it; it could not and did not burn on its own. It required a complex and dedicated logistical operation with constant maintenance and monitoring, round-the-clock shifts year-round, rain or shine, snow or wind.

Pirkei Avos suggests that these efforts were met with divine assistance; rain would not quench the fire.

Water extinguishes fire; yet even in the realm of the transparently supernatural, our sages specifically understood the divine assistance to take the form of rain that wouldn't put the fire out, as opposed to no rain over the fire. This strongly suggests that it's not viable for there to be no rain here, there, or anywhere. It just doesn't work that way.



## TorahRedux

The Kohanim would still have to work the fire in adverse weather conditions; God would ensure their efforts were successful.

The eternal flame wasn't fueled by magic; it was driven by raw human willpower and was the source of fires in all the year-round services, from the Menorah to the incense, the crescendo of the Yom Kippur service when the Kohen Gadol said his prayer for the rain.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that this illustrates that the heat and warmth of life's special moments are only fuelled by the grit and consistency of our daily grind. It wasn't an eternal flame so much as a perpetual flame – אש תמיד.

The eternal flame wasn't an external phenomenon; it came from within, entirely generated by humans. You are a miniature eternal flame; you must consistently stoke the fire under whatever conditions at whatever pace allows you to keep at it for decades without burning out.

The Kohanim stokes the flames in the pouring rain, beating winds, barefoot on the slippery stone floors. Our sages well understood the real miracle of the eternal flame; determined willpower and enduring efforts that were blessed with success. The Yom Kippur prayer rejects the immaturity of fair-weather travelers who do not accept that we live in a world that needs rain, a world where it must rain, a world where people are going to get wet and uncomfortable sometimes.

Don't be a fair-weather traveler.

Embrace the crucial role consistency, perseverance, and perspiration play in life; the miracle of the eternal flame only happens once human effort is exhausted.

As R' Chaim Volozhin teaches, we can't choose our circumstances, but we fully control our direction and velocity – לא עזיבך המקלאכה לגמור.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that we must broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of our efforts because the aggregate of all outcomes is entirely contingent on our actions – השתדלות.

For the blessing to have a place to land, you need to do all you can; ask not for a lighter burden but broader shoulders.

All you can do is your best; you must hope for the rest.

---

## **Unanswered Prayers**

4 minute read | Straightforward

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you just kept praying and didn't stop?

TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom

Subscriptions and feedback: [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com)



Most people have had a time they desperately wanted something, that if they got it, they'd never ask for anything again; to resolve the issue, find the right one, make a recovery, for the thing to work out okay. People pray hard in those moments, with more intention and hope than all the other times the stakes aren't so high.

Sometimes those prayers are fulfilled, and the perfect outcome materializes. There are countless books filled with such stories, and their popularity is a product of how inspiring they are and how they supply us with hope to not give up on our own dreams and wishes.

But what about all the other times when the hoped-for outcome doesn't happen?

No one writes those books; no one would read those books. But it happens all the time.

It even happens to the best and brightest of us, to no less than Moshe himself. In his parting words to his people, he tells them how he prayed and prayed for God's permission to enter the Land of Israel, the culmination of his life's work and the only personal indulgence he ever asked for, but God bid him to stop. It wasn't going to happen, and his prayers would remain unanswered; or at least answered in the negative, if that makes any difference.

Prayer isn't a wish fulfillment scratch card game; unanswered prayers are a corresponding aspect of prayer that we must acknowledge, that some of them probably aren't going to go exactly the way you'd like. For our intents and purposes, some prayers go to waste.

Entropy is part of all existence and our basic reality; the appearance of decay, randomness, uncertainty, and unwanted outcomes or outputs. Every interaction might have a desired or likely end goal or output, but there will be an inescapable by-product associated with it.

We are finite and limited; all we know is waste. You can be as energetic as you like, but in a couple of hours, you'll be exhausted, your muscles will fatigue, and you will need to rest, eat, and sleep. When you sleep, your brain clears waste. When you eat and drink, your body will process the calories and nutrients, and you'll need the restroom to pass waste matter. When you breathe, you breathe out waste gas, carbon dioxide. Our bodies and minds waste, and all energy and matter eventually waste.

It is significant that Pharaoh, the Torah's great villain, claims to prove his divinity by pretending he did not pass waste; not producing waste indicates something genuinely supernatural, unlimited, and infinite.

The Izhbitzer notes this friction that comes with being alive, where all effort takes a toll, the transaction tax of all things, suggesting we reorient ourselves to how we relate to waste. In this conception, waste is not a bug; it's a feature.

Fruit and nuts have peels and shells, and although they're waste in terms of what's edible, they're fully functional and fulfill their purpose of protecting the fruit, so in reality, they are not waste matter in







## TorahRedux

We must cherish and honor our past hopes and dreams but ultimately let go and release them to face each day anew.

---

*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - [Neli@TorahRedux.com](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.