

**Parshat Vayikra**  
**Conservative Rabbi Calls for Re-institution of Ancient Sacrifice**  
**By Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**  
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This morning I would like to issue a call for the re-institution of the ancient rite of sacrifice.

You heard it here first. On this *Shabbat, Parshat Vayikra*, I, your rabbi, am issuing a call to re-institute sacrifice as central tenet of modern Judaism.

Now, with all that is going on in the world, I am not sure this will make the front pages of the newspaper tomorrow – “Conservative Rabbi calls for re-institution of ancient rite of sacrifice?” Probably not, there is an awful lot going on in the world right now. It is what is called in the business, a busy news week. Congress is on the verge of either passing or defeating what is probably the single most significant piece of legislation it has dealt with in a long time – of course I am speaking about health care reform. And for better or for worse that appears to be coming to a head this weekend.

It has been a busy news week in Israel – the tensions between Israel and America, the back and forth over who is to blame over the recent flap over the Vice President’s visit and the question of an ill timed announcement regarding building in East Jerusalem. All the accusations and counter accusations – does Israel owe the Obama Administration an apology? Does the Obama Administration owe Israel an apology? There has certainly been plenty of news to fill our papers on this front.

March Madness has begun – and if not quite as consequential as the first two examples – a nation of sports fans is riveted to their TV’s as college basketball fans all over celebrate the most exciting couple of weeks in the sports year.

Yes, it is indeed a busy news week – oh yeah, one other event of note that certainly qualifies as big news – Jessica Barnoy is celebrating her Bat Mitzvah.

So as newsworthy as *my* announcement might be – I would not be surprised if it does not make the headlines of tomorrow’s Times – do you think we have a shot for the Jewish Week? Why am I making my big announcement today? Well we came to shul this morning and opened our *humashim* and began a new book of the torah. Last week, we concluded our reading of the book of *Shmot*, the book of Exodus, and this week we began our reading of the third of the five books of Moses -- the book of Leviticus, *Sefer Vayikra*.

Jessica, you have been occupied with your preparation of these verses of the Torah for some time now. Whether in preparation of your beautiful chanting of the torah or your writing of the wonderful *d’var torah* you shared with us as an introduction to today’s reading – you have known for some time now what many people just realized, that your portion, *parshat vayikra*, is one of the most difficult to explain in the whole Torah. It does not contain the absorbing stories of the book of Genesis, or the dramatic events of the book of Exodus - yours contains the first chapters of the Book of Leviticus and describes the rather dry, uninspiring laws regarding the myriad of details of the ancient sacrifices which were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem more than 2000 years ago.

What is even more puzzling is that of all the possible sections of the Torah to choose, the rabbis chose yours - *Vayikra* - the sacrifices, as the one with which all children began their study of Torah. It is rather remarkable to think that of all the possible choices, the dramatic

description of the creation of the world, the intriguing stories of the Garden of Eden, the drama of Abraham and his offspring, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, the events at the Red Sea, the giving of the torah at Mt Sinai – that all of these were passed over, as the rabbis chose this section of the torah – your *parasha*, as the best way to introduce young children to the study of torah.

While generations of Jewish students have suggested that it was a latent masochism common to all educators, which accounted for this custom of beginning with *Vayikra* - I am not convinced. The *midrash* suggests a charming reason for this custom: “Little children are pure and the sacrifices are pure; so let those who are pure occupy themselves with things that are pure.” That’s nice - but I suspect there is yet another, deeper reason why Jewish youngsters began their Torah studies with *Vayikra*.

It is just possible that *Vayikra* - may contain the single most important truth that the Torah and Judaism have to teach us. A truth that is so basic and so important that our teachers wanted to impress upon young minds, at the earliest opportunity the inescapable truth - that sacrifice is at the very center of life. That nothing worthwhile in life will ever be accomplished without it.

Now in this already busy news week, I want to make absolutely sure that I am not misquoted. If in fact this becomes a headline in the Jewish Week, or the Forward, or the Times – I want you to be my witnesses to make sure they get it right. I do not want to inadvertently add news to an already overburdened week. “Conservative Rabbi speaks out in favor of the restoration of sacrifices in Judaism.” No, that is not what I said. I want to make it perfectly clear that what I am calling for is the restoration of *sacrifice*, as a cornerstone of Judaism, not sacrifices. Stop the presses.

Come on – who would have thought that a rabbi was actually calling for the restoration of sacrifices? Well, believe it or not there is actually a conversation in certain far right religious sections of our people where the possibility of the restoration of animal sacrifices is being seriously discussed. Although that is *not* what I am calling for today, if you think about it – there is an interesting question here.

The torah commands *kashrut* – and we Jews thousands of years later embrace the mitzvah as a cornerstone of our faith. The torah commands *Shabbat* and we Jews thousands of years later still embrace this mitzvah as a cornerstone of our faith. The torah commands that we wrap little black boxes around our arms and head and we Jews thousands of years later still embrace the mitzvah of *tefillen*. The torah commands *korbanot*, sacrifices, and we Jews have not offered a single sacrifice for almost 2000 years now – why not?

Well, mostly it has to do with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Sacrifices were offered by *kohanim*, by priests in the *beit hamikdash* – Holy Temple located on *Har Habayit* – on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. That Temple was destroyed twice – first by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and then it was rebuilt some 50 years later only to be destroyed a second time by the Romans in the year 70 CE and it has remained in ruins and we have remained a people dispersed to the four corners of the earth for the last 2000 years – no Temple, no sacrifices.

For most of the past 2000 years the issue of sacrifices remained an academic discussion – after all few Jews lived in Israel and even those who did were subject to foreign rule – the idea, let alone the possibility, of reinstating sacrifices in a rebuilt Temple was just not in the realm of the possible. But, reality never was an impediment to Jewish thinkers and one of the famous disagreements between Maimonides the medieval Jewish rationalist who lived

in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and Nachmanides who lived shortly after him – was over this question. Maimonides wrote and argued that God always held sacrifices as an inferior form of worship to prayer and philosophical meditation. Maimonides wrote and argued that God understood that He was dealing at first with a very primitive people who were used to the general conventions of their day – and in those days people worshiped their gods by means of sacrifices. Since that is all that they saw around them – it was natural that the early Jews would think that sacrifices were an important part of a relationship with God. Maimonides argues that God's decision to allow sacrifices was a concession to human psychological limitations. It was too much to expect the Israelites to go from pagan worship to prayer to the One God in a single leap. God, argues Maimonides, was apparently a student of Jean Piaget and believed in the developmental approach to education – and God understood that it would be unreasonable and unproductive to expect people to embrace a concept that was beyond their particular stage of development.

In contrast, Nachmanides argued that sacrifices was not about what the people could handle but about what God wanted and that they remained an ideal in Judaism and central to Jewish life. Nachmanides believed that we were only limited to implementation of this central ideal due to our lack of access and control over the site of the Temple itself. Maimonides would seem to have little interest to revive *korbanot* even if the opportunity presented itself

Now this all remained a fascinating academic debate until 1967, when for the first time in 2000 years, with the success of the 6-day war, Jews once again controlled access to the Temple Mount and the question of sacrifices re-entered Jewish conversation in a very different way. Many, most (?) Jews embrace some version of Maimonides approach that whatever role sacrifices once held in Jewish life – they do not do so today, we have moved on and they are part of a more primitive past, that even God would no longer be interested in them – yet there are those who hold some version of the Nahmanides view that not only are sacrifices still a central part of Jewish belief, but now that we control the Temple Mount they should once again become a part of modern Jewish practice.

Oh, there is one small impediment to this later suggestion – in the intervening time our Moslem cousins have built the Dome of the Rock - -what they believe to be the third holiest site in all of Islam – smack dab on top of the site of our ancient Temple. To rebuild the Temple would require first tearing down the third holiest site in Islam – and most rational Jews see this is just a bit of a problem. Although there are Jews who are already gassing up the bulldozers, God bless them.

There have been some court cases in Israel attempting to assert Jewish control over the Temple site so that the Dome of the Rock could in fact be torn down and the Temple rebuilt – fortunately these have all failed. There is a yeshiva in Jerusalem that specializes in the study of the laws of sacrifices in anticipation of the time in the not too distant future when we will be able to assert our control and reinstitute animal sacrifices. And there was even a *teshuvah* written this year by one Rabbi Bar-Hayyim the head of the Machon Shilo Talmudic Institute that says while we wait for the rebuilding of the Temple – we can still reinstitute the *korban pesach* – the Passover sacrifice which requires not access to the Temple itself, but merely the Temple precinct. No need to tear down anything – just reassert our access to the area outside the dome of the Rock, set up our altars and let the sacrificing begin.

Now all of this was a side trip (although I hope you found it an interesting digression) – to my opening suggestion that today's torah reading of *Vayikra* and its introduction of sacrifices – contains what is possibly the single most important message in the torah. I

want to make it absolutely clear – that on this issue, I your rabbi remain a fervent disciple of Maimonides and not Nachmanides. And what I am preaching is not the importance of sacrifices but sacrifice. What I seek today is not a new form of animal sacrifice but a new form of human sacrifice. I am arguing today not for the slaughter of animals but a realignment of human perspective.

The text of *Vayikra* may seem to deal with what for many of us is an antiquated practice but we ignore its core message at our peril. And this is why Jewish teachers insisted that it be lesson #1. Our teachers were motivated - not by a desire to restore animal slaughter but by an understanding that unless their students learned the meaning of sacrifice in their own lives, the lessons of *Vayikra*, they will never make very much of their lives.

In our age of instant self-gratification, self-indulgence, and self-absorption- we need, now more than ever, to pay attention to the lessons of *Vayikra*.

I turn on my TV and there is this guy Glen Beck ranting and raving. I try and listen to what he is saying and I am shocked. Should we dismiss him as entertainment? Or is Glen Beck the increasingly popular face of a larger movement? He calls it Libertarianism and defines it by saying: "let people alone, get the government out of everybody's lives, let everybody rule themselves." It is a philosophy that seems to have found its day.

We will probably find out this weekend whether or not we will get Health Care Reform or not. Look, I don't know if this is a good plan or not – what do I know – I'm a rabbi. But I do know this – if this imperfect plan fails – the Health Care crisis in this country will probably not be revisited for 5-10 years. I am angry at all of our politicians who made such a mess of this process – but is not the prospect of covering 31 million uninsured vulnerable Americans something we should be concerned about? Is not a reform that protects those with pre-existing conditions from being methodically dropped by insurance companies worthy of our concern?

Politicians are afraid to vote for any reform because the mood of the voters back home is to punish anyone who takes money out of their pockets – when did we become such a selfish nation? When did Glen Beck become the voice of the people? We have lost any notion of national sacrifice.

The same attitude plagues the Middle East. Neither side we are told by political pundits, neither side is in a mode to compromise, neither side is in a mode to sacrifice anything. Great, than we all deserve the mess we are in. There was a time when great leaders understood that nothing of substance would ever be accomplished with out sacrifice. There was a time when being a leader meant giving voice to the difficult choices that lay ahead and they then inspired their people to make the sacrifices that were necessary to achieve them. Not so today – the people are in no mood to sacrifice anything and the politicians are more concerned about getting re-elected than leading: A pox on all their houses.

Even the simplest of basketball players on any one of the 64 teams that entered the NCAA College Basketball tournament understands that all of their hopes and dreams of winning the NCAA, of getting a chance to play on a professional basketball team – all hinge on one thing – their willingness to sacrifice.

When Isaac Stern concluded a concert recital one evening, he was approached by an ardent admirer, who exclaimed rapturously: "Oh Mr. Stern, I would give anything to be able to play the violin as magnificently as you do!" To which the maestro replied softly: "Would you give 12 hours a day?"

My friends, that is the crucial question that this week's Torah portion (*Parshat Vayikra*) poses to us. Life is not only about wanting - it is also about giving. Too many of us view life as a giant cafeteria, where you think everything is neatly laid out for the choosing - food, clothing, power, privilege, success - all we have to do is reach out and take it - and it is ours. This, my friends is not life - this is a caricature of life.

Life, the Torah would remind us is an altar - not a cafeteria. And the things that go on an altar are sacrifices. And until we have learned that basic truth we are not yet ready for mature and meaningful living.

This is the essential message of what it means to become a Bat Mitzvah. All the work and the effort to stand on this Bima and participate in this sacred service - the years of Jewish education, the mastery of Hebrew, the Bat Mitzvah lessons, the practice and practice and practice - is all to teach the fundamental lesson that without sacrifice nothing worthwhile can be achieved. Great character, great lives and great nations - all are built on sacrifice.

"No religion is worth its salt," wrote Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, " which does not make great demands upon its adherents...Too many of our people want an easy going religion, one which does not interfere with their leisure, their sleep, or their television, which calls for no study and no observance; which does not challenge or disturb them; a religion without any spiritual travail, without any stab of thought or conscience, without any sacrifices, the religion of a self-pampering people. No religion", he concludes, "has ever survived that kind of emotional and intellectual vacuum. Judaism least of all."

I hope that in this busy news week – that we do make one more bit of news this morning. I hope there is a headline in next weeks Jewish Week or the Forward – but I hope they get the quote right – “Conservative Rabbi calls for reinstatement of ancient sacrifice” – and that the spirit of sacrifice which has been the hallmark of our people will once again find expression in our lives.