

Parashat Tzav The Poor Man's Offering

Please read the end of this blog where I thank you all for your kind contributions and support on my recent North America tour.

The Pride of the Poor

I grew up in an upper middle class home in Denmark and money was never important to me. My parents worked very hard so we three girls would have everything they didn't have when growing up. Yet, we did not appreciate our parents' efforts to ensure that we never lacked anything materially. Food, clothes, travels; and a nice, private room in a suburban villa was all taken for granted. I moved to Israel and chose the Torah path, where spirituality took precedence over materialism. For seven years, my husband and I soaked up Torah and became satiated from its well, without caring about 'making a living.' We lived a Torah lifestyle, according to our sages: "Such is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you shall eat, water in small measure you shall drink, and upon the ground you shall sleep. Live a life of deprivation and toil in Torah. If you do so, 'you are fortunate, and it will be good for you' (*Tehillim* 128:2). You are fortunate in this world, and it is good for you in the World-to-Come (*Pirkei Avot* 6:4). Indeed, we felt fortunate and happy with our hand-me-downs and *Yad Eliezer* (Goodwill) baskets, as we proudly cited the intricacies of the Torah commentaries. I could never relate to my parents' generation who often judged people based on how much money they made. We felt no need to prove ourselves by our pocketbook, and we enjoyed the simple, spiritual life. In fact today, amongst some it is actually a status symbol to be poor! However, throughout history, up until these recent times of material overflow, people's worth was measured by their financial means, and being poor was looked upon as a lower status. Therefore, the Torah comes to protect the honor of the poor in regards to various sacrifices.

An Offering of the Soul

This week's parasha opens with the mitzvah of העֹלָה/ha'olah – the burnt offering.

סַפֵּר וַיִּקְרָא פֶּרֶק ו' (ב) צוֹ אֶת אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר זֹאת תֹּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה הוּא הָעֹלָה עַל מִוֶּקֶדָה עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ כָּל הַלַּיְלָה עַד הַבֹּקֶר וְאִשׁ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ תִּוְקֵד בּוֹ:

"Command Aaron and his sons, saying: This is the law of the burnt-offering: it is that which goes up on its firewood upon the altar all night until the morning; while the fire on the altar is kept burning in it" (*Vayikra* 6:2).

The Hebrew word for "burnt offering" עֹלָה/olah actually means to 'ascend.' According to classical commentaries, this term refers to the *ascent of the mind* after making the sacrifice. The olah offering could be made by anyone needing such atonement – *at-one-ment* – with Hashem. It was not intended only for the rich who could afford to sacrifice a cow. A dove or even the inexpensive meal offering qualifies for the burnt-offering:

משנה מסכת מנחות פרק יג (יא) נאמר בעולת הבמה אשה ריח ניחוח, ובעולת העוף אשה ריח ניחוח, ובמנחה אשה ריח ניחוח, ללמד, שאחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט, ובלבד שיכין אדם את דעתו לשמים:

It is said of the burnt-offerings of cattle, “an offering made by fire of a satisfying aroma to Hashem;” and of the burnt-offerings of birds, “an offering made by fire of a satisfying aroma to Hashem;” and of the meal-offering “an offering made by fire of a satisfying aroma to Hashem.” This is to teach you that it is the same whether a person offers much or little, as long as he directs his heart to heaven (*Mishna Menachot 13:11*).

“Hashem desires our heart” (Ramban, *Ketuvot 9b*). There is no reason to feel guilty even though we can only do a little, as long as, we do what we can with our full heart. In my experience, often, the people that have less give more. Sometimes, I even feel guilty receiving their donation, when I am aware of their tight budget. Hashem really values the humble gift of the poor. When a poor man, who does not own an animal, scrapes together the few coins necessary to buy the ingredients of the meal offering, Hashem considers it as if he is offering his very soul (*Menachot 104b*). Regarding the inexpensive meal-offering it states, “A *nefesh* (soul) who sacrifices a meal offering to Hashem” (*Vayikra 2:1*). This term isn’t used by any of the other sacrifices. The reason why the term, “*nefesh*” is used only by the meal offering is that Hashem says, ‘This poor man has brought me this offering; I consider it as though he brought me his soul...’ (Rashi, *Vayikra 2:1*).

The Privilege to Give What You Can

I was moved by the following story that beautifully illustrates Rashi’s commentary.: Avraham was a man with limited financial means but unlimited drive and determination to connect more and more to his Judaism. His friend told him about a parlor meeting with a prominent Rabbi who was raising funds for his institution. His friend, who was in a similar financial situation, suggested that they go and participate. Avraham was hesitant at first. “I don't think we are the clientele who they are trying to attract.” However his friend, , insisted and so, he agreed to join him. At the parlor meeting, the Rav spoke excellently. Afterwards, people started to call out their pledges to his institution. They ranged from several thousand dollars down to a few hundred. Since these amounts were out of range for these two men, Avraham was feeling a bit uncomfortable and unsure what to do. Then, he saw his friend pull out his checkbook and proudly write a check for twenty-five dollars, which was an amount that he could afford, he urged Avraham to do the same. “We have the same obligation and privilege as everyone else to donate what we can. We have nothing to be ashamed of. In the eyes of Hashem, our donation is just as pleasing as that of everyone else” (Rabbi Ciner’s Weekly Parsha Page).

Honoring the Poor on Purim

The holiday of Purim also highlights the value of the poor and the importance of honoring them. One of the main mitzvot of Purim, is the mitzvah of *Matanot La'evyonim* – giving a gift of money to at least two poor people on the day of Purim, equal to at least the value of a simple meal. Although, we also have a mitzvah to deliver *Mishloach Manot*, (ready-to-eat-gifts to friends), and enjoy a holiday meal on Purim, it is inappropriate to eat a fancy meal, and buy expensive *Mishloach Manot* at the expense of gifts to the poor (Rambam, *Hilchot Megillah*

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

2:17). In addition, there is a beautiful custom to contribute three half-dollar coins (or their equivalent) to tzedakka, before reading the *Megillah* in the synagogue. This symbolizes the half-shekel that every Jew used to give to the Temple (*Shemot* 30:11-16). Why does the Torah specify a half-shekel instead of a whole? By giving only a half, each of us realizes that we can never become complete unless we are part of the larger community. Accordingly, Jewish law states that everyone, whether rich or poor, is to give no more and no less than a half-shekel. This teaches us that every Jew is equally important.

Thank You for Both a Lot and a Little

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of you – benevolent souls, who donated so generously to Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin, during my recent North America tour. I know you all gave whatever you could and I'm very appreciative. Some of you donated money. Others provided comfortable accommodations, and still others fed me healthy greens. Some of you opened your home to host an event and others spent your valuable time and money to help publicize my events. Many of you did all of the above. Whether you gave a lot or a little, I know that you truly gave of yourselves, and your kind gifts really count! With Hashem's help and yours, Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin will now be able to offer conditions that are more comfortable for all of our students.