

The Mishkan as a Kiruv Project / Parashat Teruma

By Rav Hillel Van-Leeuwen, Head of Leadership Development, the Mizrahi World Movement

This week with Parashat Terumah we begin a series of 5 parashot (16 chapters!) dedicated to the planning and the actual building of the Mishkan which served as the spiritual and educational center of Am Yisrael for close to 500 years, until Shlomo HaMelech built the first Temple in Jerusalem.

The Mishkan had many diverse vessels, each laden with significance, unique purpose, and its divine set of laws. Towards the end of our parasha, we are introduced to one of the Mishkan's central elements - the Altar, on which, at peak seasons, hundreds of sacrifices were offered daily.

This is a good opportunity to inquire about the significance and purpose of offering animals on the altar as part of our religious service.

'To sacrifice' means to give up something of yours, for the sake of a higher cause. One gives up an animal, bringing it to the Mishkan as an offering, hoping to come closer to HaShem through this action. Indeed, the Hebrew word for 'sacrifice' is קָרַבֵּן. The root is 'karov', meaning 'close'.

How exactly can one get closer to HaShem through slaughtering an innocent lamb?

One possible answer might be this: my action displays my trust in HaShem to eventually fill the loss I had just inflicted upon myself as I gave up some of my food (meat), drink (milk) and cloths (wool, leather), all of which were traditionally provided by the very animals our ancestors sacrificed. This brings me to a higher level of belief and bonds my thoughts and actions to HaShem.

But there's a deeper aspect to it. When Jews visited the *Mishkan* – and later the *Mikdash* in Jerusalem – their experience was one of intense spiritual impact; The grandeur and the harmony, the swiftness of the Cohanim at their work and the feeling of unity within the Jewish people who gathered there from all around the world (in times when international travel was a rare practice), and the overwhelming sense of closeness between them and their Father in heaven. From many ancient sources we learn that these tangible feelings surrounded everybody and filled all hearts with joy.

Here is a true story, which might sound crazy to some. In 1980, I was a nine-year-old student in 4th grade when our teacher thought it might be wise to graphically demonstrate the issues we were studying in class - the Korbanot in parashat VaYikra. He therefore purchased a lamb in the Jerusalem market and invited a local shochet to the sandbox at our school's back yard. I will spare you all the gory details; suffice it to say that several of my classmates became lifelong vegetarians that day. However, the one dominant feeling I vividly remember, was my sheer awe and true amazement at the swiftness of the transition from life to death! A minute ago that cute lamb was grazing grass, moving about and making gentle sounds, and now it is just a lifeless pile of meat and bones! Where, for heaven's sake, did its **life** go?

Back in the days of the Mishkan, in a world where the slaughter of animals with its

inevitable bloody scenes, was seen in a grossly different way than in our modern, protected and politically-correct era, the sacrificing of an animal offered our ancestors a moment of reflection. The owner of the animal would stand nearby, watching closely as the Cohen *shechted* the animal with one quick, swift and practically painless motion. Witnessing this sudden loss of life would cause those involved to reflect on how frail and temporary **their own life** can be.

If life is so feeble, the owner of the animal was probably thinking, it should not be taken for granted. None of us are guaranteed to wake up tomorrow morning to enjoy another day in HaShem's world (real "life insurance" doesn't exist), and therefore I thank HaShem for the very fact that I am alive! The next thought that might naturally come to mind is that for as long as I live, I should strive to make the best out of my life, to give to others and to live a meaningful life. Who knows when my life might end? I better cherish every day and each hour of it while I can! These simple thoughts work wonders to bring us closer to HaShem.

Here in Israel, many feel that HaShem has "shifted gears" over the past 10-15 years, fast-forwarding history and moving the pieces on the global chessboard with greater resolve. Israel's explosive growth in multiple fields simultaneously, the recent unforeseen collapse of several Arab countries around us, the unprecedented open support and admiration for Israel within the Trump administration, the strengthening of political, military and commercial ties between Israel and China, India, Russia, Australia and even Saudi Arabia, the global recognition of the tremendous projects through which Israel is assisting African countries - all amount to us wondering what amazingly good things HaShem still has in store for us in the immediate future. Suddenly, a sovereign Israel with Beit HaMikdash as its spiritual heart doesn't necessarily sound as a futuristic scene.

I do not know whether the Mikdash will include animal offerings to bring us closer to HaShem, or will "clean" tefillot do the trick. Either way, may we merit building it soon, in unity and peace.