

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Vayikra and Avodah: The Book of Divine Service

Parshat Vayikra, Exodus 1:1- 40-38:1

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

I have heard that in Eastern Europe it was customary to begin a child's education by teaching him the book of Leviticus. While the stories in Genesis and Exodus may be more entertaining, they are sophisticated texts which deal with the complexities of life. These stories are beyond the understanding of an innocent child. *Vayikra*, on the other hand, deals with the daily rules of life: worship, family, justice. Children understand rules. While many of these rules are connected with the divine service of the priests, others are readily understandable to even a young child: "Love your neighbor as yourself," and "Don't stand by the blood of your brother." It defines in very specific terms what foods we may and may not eat, what the sacred times of year are, and how to deal with illness when it strikes us. On a deeper level, Leviticus is about living a holy life through our day to day actions.

Dr. Baruch Levine, the author of the JPS Commentary on the book of Leviticus writes: "Two concepts embody the primary message of Leviticus. First, the Israelites are one community (*edah*), united by a common destiny and by a holy way of life as commanded by the Lord Himself. They are forbidden to worship any other deity or follow the impure ways of other nations (19:4, 20:1-3,6), Second, the Israelites were granted the Promised Land as an eternal estate (*ahuzzah*) on condition that they follow the laws of God and remain faithful to His covenant. In Leviticus, the priests of Israel are instructed in the ways of holiness, and the Israelites are told what the Lord requires of them." A child's education begins, then, with an understanding that Judaism is a way of life through which we strive for both goodness and holiness in all that we do. At the heart of this book is *Avodah*, the service of God.

Pirke Avot Chapter 1:2. Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say: On three things the world is sustained: on the Torah (study), on the service (*avodah*), and on deeds of loving kindness (*gemilut hasadim*).

Sources

Avot D'Rebbe Natan Chapter 4

On the service: How so? So long as the service is maintained, the world is a blessing to its inhabitants and the rain come down in their season, as it is said: "To love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, that I give you the rain of the land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain... And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle." (Deuteronomy 11:13-15) But when the service is not maintained, the world is not a blessing to its inhabitants and the rains do not come down in their season, as it is said, "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceive... and he shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain..." (Deut. 11:16-17) ... There is no service more beloved of the Holy One, blessed be He, than the Temple service.

Babylonian Talmud Menachot 110a

It is taught that R. Simeon ben Azzai said: Pause and consider what is stated in the chapter on sacrifices. Neither the term *El* nor the term *Elohim* is found there--only "Lord (YHVH)," so as not to give a would-be disputant the opportunity to differ [with regard to God's unity]. Furthermore, of the ox, which is large, it is said, "An offering made by fire, of a sweet savor" (Lev. 1:9); of a bird, which is small, "an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor" (Lev. 1:17); and of a meal offering, "an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor" (Lev. 2:2)--to teach you that it is the same whether a man offers much or little, so long as he directs his heart to Heaven. Lest you say, He needs the offering for food, Scripture states, "If I were hungry, I would not speak to thee of it" (Ps. 50:12). I did not bid you offer sacrifices, that you might be able to say, "I will do His will, so that He will do my will." You sacrifice not for My sake, but for your own sake, as is said, "You shall sacrifice it for your sake" (Lev. 19:5).

Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 2a

We have been taught: "To love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 11:13). What service is that with the heart? You must say that it is prayer.

Commentary

The word *Avodah* cannot be easily translated into English. It means work, service and ritual. When Shimon the Righteous spoke of *Avodah*, most likely he meant the Temple service. On *Yom Kippur* afternoon we recite the *Avodah* during the *Musaf* Service. This liturgical poem describes the ritual of atonement which took place in the Temple before its destruction on *Yom Kippur* day. We also know that Shimon the Righteous was the High Priest in the Temple and that he lived in the second or third century, BCE. Tradition claims that he was a contemporary of Alexander the Great though the claim that they actually met is most likely apocryphal. For Shimon the Righteous and for his contemporaries, the temple service literally maintained the world.

But we use the word *avodah* in other ways in the Torah. The Egyptians enslaved our ancestors and forced them to perform *avodah kashah*, hard labor. We are repeatedly reminded never to forget that we were *avadim*, slaves (from the same root as *avodah*) in the land of Egypt. Moses is also referred to as an *eved*, a servant of God.

For the sages of the Talmud, the word *Avodah* took on other meanings. It is used as a term for prayer as in "Service of the heart," and as a general term for ritual. In the Passover Haggadah, the rebellious child asks, "*Mah HaAvodah Hazot lachem*," what is this service to you? We are left to wonder whether he sees the worship of God as divine service or unnecessary and harsh labor.

In modern times, *avodah* has taken on other meanings. A.D. Gordon, one of the early Zionist thinkers speaks about the sacredness of *avodah*, labor. For Gordon there was something deeply religious about sinking one's hands into the soil and working to build a new home land for the Jewish people. He writes "the Jewish people has been completely cut off from nature and imprisoned within city walls these two thousand years...We lack the habit of labor--not labor performed out of external compulsion, but labor to which one is attached in a natural and organic way. This kind of labor binds a people to its soil and to its national culture."

Jewish spirituality is expressed in the most concrete ways; not just in faith but in deeds both ritual and ethical. In the end, however, we must choose how we see this *avodah*, this service. Is it harsh labor (as the rebellious child sees it) or the privilege of serving God with our head, our heart and our hands? *Avodah* is not just what we do, but how we choose to see the daily acts we perform. We can become slaves to the physical world or we can become servants fulfilling a higher destiny by serving God.

Questions to Ponder

1. Why do you think Shimon the Righteous singled out these three elements as essential to Judaism and to the well being of the world? How do they sustain the world?
2. What role do *Torah*, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim* play in your life? How do they define and shape your identity as a Jew and as a human being? Do you think they are relevant to other people besides Jews?
3. Why do you think Shimon the Righteous described the temple service as *avodah*, labor? In what ways is the service of God similar to the daily work which you do? In what ways are they different from one another?
4. We no longer offer sacrifices and yet we continue to read and study this section of the book of Leviticus. What meaning and relevance do these passages have for us today?
5. In what ways do we "serve God?" How are we God's "servants?" Who (or what) else do we serve in the world?
6. Do you ever feel that that your professional life is a form of divine service, *avodah*? If so when? If not, how could you turn your work into a higher calling of divine service?

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a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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