

TIMELESS∞TORAH

PARSHAT VAYIKRA: The Potential & Pitfalls of Humanity

The Greatness of Man

Sefer Vayikra turns its focus from the Jewish people as a nation to the Jew as an individual. Notably, the very first word of Parshat Vayikra, after the introductory verse, is *Adam* — a man. According to the Zohar (Vayikra 3:48a), out of the many words in Hebrew used to refer to human beings, the word *Adam* is chosen here because it denotes the greatest level that mankind can reach. To demonstrate this, the Zohar cites the verse that describes how Hashem created *Adam HaRishon*: ‘*Ki b’tzelem Elokim asa et ha’adam* – for in the Image of God He created Man’ (Bereshit 9:6). Humankind, referred to in that verse as *adam*, was made in the very image of Hashem.

In the context of the general theme of Parshat Vayikra, however, this observation of the Zohar is difficult to place. The entirety of this parshah, and much of the ensuing *parshiyot*, deal with the laws of the various *korbanot*, the primary purpose of which was to atone for someone who had sinned. Seemingly, one would have expected a slightly less complimentary term to describe a person who had committed a sin requiring atonement.

The Zohar itself asks this question, and the answer is powerful. The very existence of Creation, writes the Zohar, is dependent on *korbanot*, which are brought specifically by one who has the ability to sin. The greatness of mankind is defined not by the person who finds themselves in an optimal position. Rather, it is defined by one who has acted reprehensibly but is able to reach beyond that and ask themselves what Hashem wants from them now.

When a person is able to go beyond their own failings and see the bigger picture, striving to fulfil Hashem’s will in whatever situation they might find themselves, they have reached the pinnacle of Creation.

This idea is reminiscent of a well-known passage from Primo Levi’s Holocaust memoir, *If This Is a Man* (1947). Levi describes an Italian civilian worker called Lorenzo who would bring him food rations every day and perform other similar favours. For Levi, this interaction kept him alive because it reminded him that outside of the corrupt and savage world of hatred and terror, there existed a humanity that was pure and uncontaminated. This is the *adam* that merits to bring *korbanot*: a person, who although simple and prone to sin, is able to strive for greatness in any situation.

Intrinsic Goodness

Another Midrash draws an analogy between *Adam HaRishon* and the word *adam* used to introduce the parshah of *korbanot*. *Adam* committed the very first sin through consuming the forbidden fruit, the Midrash says, yet you are able to extricate yourself from sin through bringing a *korban*. What is fascinating about this comparison is that *Adam* was actually not given such an opportunity to rectify his mistake. He was left to contend with the result of what he did, while we are able to bring *korbanot* to atone for our misdemeanours. According to the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), the explanation of this lies in the Midrash’s description of *Adam beginning to sin*. *Adam* sinned although there was no precedent for sin in the world.



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We, on the other hand, have many negative influences that push us in the wrong direction and we are therefore always given a chance to return to our pristine condition.

This lesson explains another word in this verse: '*mikem* — from within you.' The Midrash points out that in Parshat Tazria (13:2), the verse also uses the term *adam* to refer to someone who develops *tzaraat*, (a specific skin affliction understood to be a physical manifestation of a spiritual malady), but does not there use the word '*mikem*'. Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) explained that this is because *tzaraat* is a negative concept, whereas bringing a *korban* is a manifestation of a person's inner drive for religious devotion. Judaism believes that negative behaviour is external and can be changed, while positive actions and thoughts reflect a person's essence.

The concept that a person is intrinsically good is not merely homiletical but is applied by the Rambam (d.1204) to the practical world of halachah (Hilchot Gerushin 2:20). There exist certain instances when a person can be coerced by a qualified Beit Din to perform certain mitzvot even if those mitzvot, by their very nature, must be done under their own free will. Clearly, this is a contradiction. If one is forced to do something, it cannot be understood as their own decision. But the Rambam explains that every Jew indeed desires to do good and keep Hashem's will; sin is only a result of an overpowering *yetzer hara* — evil inclination. When exceptional circumstances allow a Beit Din to force someone to do a mitzvah, they are merely weakening the person's *yetzer hara* and allowing the purity of their true essence to shine through.

Teshuvah and Korbanot

An important postscript to this discussion is made by Rabbi Shalom Berezovsky (d.2000), in his work *Netivot Shalom*. Seemingly, there are two parts to this verse. The first half of the verse introduces the subject and the setting — '*Adam ki yakriv mikem* — A person, when he brings a sacrifice among you' — while the second part of the verse details what exactly the *korban* is — '*Min habeheimah, min hatzon u'min habakar* — From the animals, the sheep or cattle'. Rabbi Berezovsky, however, takes this to refer to two distinct aspects of bringing a *korban*. The second part of the verse talks about the '*beheimah*', the part of a person's soul that is rooted in their body. This part of the soul becomes tainted when one acts in the wrong way and can be rectified through the sacrificial service. The *adam* in the first part of the verse, however, is a reference to one's intellectual soul. This is our deep-seated connection with Hashem that is disturbed when one transgresses His commandments. *Korbanot* alone will not remove that disturbance. An integral part of bringing a *korban* is *teshuvah*, sincere repentance for one's misdoings, together with heartfelt attempts to return to that state of closeness with Hashem.

Even if the absence of the Beit HaMikdash today precludes us from bringing *korbanot*, the critical element of rectification for sin — *teshuvah* — still remains. This is the fundamental message of *Adam ki yakriv mikem* — no matter where a person finds themselves, they always have the capability within them to reach beyond their current state and return to a better place.

Next Week: Tzav - Aspiring to Move From Seven to Eight