

“From Your Kishkes”

D’var Torah for Par’shat Vayikra, March 19, 2021

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

Our parashah introduces us to the Book of Leviticus, Sefer Vayikra. As you well know, Leviticus deals mostly – though not exclusively – with the complex procedures by which the Kohanim (or Temple priests) offered the Israelites’ heartfelt sacrifices to God.

When we get to Leviticus 19 we will meet up with one of the most magnificent articulations of social ethics of all time. That’s the so-called “holiness code,” Par’shat K’doshim. But long before we get there, we have to wade through a lot of blood and suet. A lot of smoke going up from the altar. A lot of legs and entrails.

As for those entrails: The Hebrew for the innards of the animal on the altar is *kerev*. *Kerev* shares a root with the Torah’s term for a sacrifice, *korban*. Everett Fox translates *korban* not as “sacrifice” but as “near-offering.” His translation picks up on the literal meaning of kuf-reysh-beit, “near” or “close.”

A sacrifice is a way not only of bringing one’s expensive animal near to the altar, and by extension to God’s self. It is also – and perhaps primarily - a way of bringing one’s *own* self near to God, or at least near to one’s sense of one’s own spiritual center. One’s own *kerev*. One’s spiritual kishkes, if you will.

The introductory words of the Book give us a clue to this dual act of “bringing near” and “getting near.” But there’s no way you would hear it without help from a master of the Torah’s word plays. For that, let’s turn to the ShLaH, the Sh’ney

Luchot Hab'rit, the "two tables of the covenant," which is the nom de plume of 16th century rabbi Isaiah Horowitz.

Here is the verse he is homing in on: "When anyone from among you presents an offering to Ado-nai." *Adam ki yakriv mikem korban l'ado-nai.* "That individual shall choose his offering from the cattle, whether from the herd or the flock." *Min hab'heimah, min habakar, umin hatzon.* "Thus shall you all offer your sacrifices." *Takrivu et korban'chem.*

The ShLaH picks up on the preposition *mikem*, which is the plural for "from among you," as in "when anyone from among you presents an offering." He knows that the word is superfluous. It could just as easily say "whenever any one presents an offering." Why "from among you?"

The clue is in the next phrase: "from the cattle, the herd or the flock." Says the ShLaH, an offering from the herd or the flock is not the only alternative for a sacrificial offering. In fact, it is the second-rate alternative. It is merely the standard boiler-plate sort of thing that people give to God in hopes that by so doing they will have fulfilled their basic obligation and be done with the whole thing. Offering an animal is tantamount to "checking off" the item from one's to-do list. Bullock for God? Check.

The first-rate, preferred offering is right there in the text, right in front of our noses. It is *mikem*. "From among you." Or "y'all," as we say in Texas where I come from. The offering of y'all's collective humanity. Y'all's shared sense of sacred purpose.

Says the ShLaH, if you merely offer a head of cattle, you are offering “your” offering. The bull or sheep or goat belongs to you. But it is not you. It is the bull’s *kerev*, its kishkes. But it is not your kishkes.

Your kishkes – your spiritual core – is the Godliness that inheres within both individuals and community. That Godliness, in effect, belongs not to you, but to God. Therefore the text says not *l’ado-nai* meaning “to God,” but *l’adonai* meaning “belonging to God.” The grammar works, and it is ingenious.

His bottom line is that only this offering of what already belongs to God, but which resides in your *kerev*, your kishkes, your inner being, only that offering truly fulfills your obligation to make a sacrifice, a *korban*, a “near-offering.”

And even though each individual brings that offering, he or she brings it as a member of the collective, the community, the *k’lal*.

When I first saw this teaching a year ago, at the beginning of our strange and challenging condition, I didn’t fully realize how relevant it would be to us today. We have indeed relied on the whole of us, the *mikem*, to rescue countless individuals among us from physical, mental, or spiritual disaster. Millions of individual sacrifices have come from – and gone to – the greater needs of our *k’lal*.

In the words of the S’fas Emes, riffing on the same verse in the 19th century: “This is the Torah’s meaning of *mikem*, “from you” in the plural, as if to say “by means of entering your singular self into the midst of the Israelite community.” *V’zeh mikem, k’lomar, al y’dey k’nesset atzmo b’toch k’lal yisrael.*

So it was for our ancestors within the kishkes, the innards of their collective, the community of Israel. So it is for us Jews today as members of the larger human community, the *k'lal ha'adam*. We bring the best of what we have to offer, which is the divine image that not ours, but God's, but that only we, through a commitment we make in our kishkes, can return that divinity to its holy source.