

Parshat Vayikra, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

As we opened the book of Leviticus this week and began to read of the sacrificial system commanded in Parshat Vayikra, I asked my juniors in Tefilah which they'd prefer: the smells and power of the sacrificial system, or the words of the siddur? The room was split about 50/50. For some students, the idea of a blood-and-guts kind of worship, with sounds, smells and sights that might overwhelm the senses, seemed repugnant. All of a sudden, they re-embraced traditional prayer! For others, a physical, kinesthetic worship experience sounded far more appealing than sitting in a room, trying to find meaning in the seemingly obscure words in the prayerbook.

This very question is at the heart of the classic debate between Rambam, the 12th century rationalist philosopher, and Ramban, the 13th century Kabbalist who directed his comments on sacrifices to his predecessor.

For Rambam (Maimonides), prayer was a much more effective means of communicating with God. Noting the prophetic distaste for sacrifices, Maimonides argues that the sacrificial system was never the ultimate goal. Instead, God conceded to what we were used to seeing in Egypt and in the pagan world and allowed us to bring sacrifices simply to meet our need to be like the other nations. The sacrifices were a stepping stone to a more cerebral, more meaningful method of worship.

The mystical Ramban (Nachmanides) scoffed at this overly idea. Sacrifices were not a concession!! On the contrary; bringing sacrifices has always been a human need, pre-dating our time in Egypt. From Cain and Abel to Noah and Abraham, the first humans on the planet brought offerings to God. For Ramban, each part of the animal offering represented a part of ourselves, laid on the altar before God. The arms and legs with which we have sinned were embodied on the animal's limbs, the hearts which held wrongful feelings were consecrated on the altar, the fire itself creating a "pleasing odor" to God. The loss of the sacrificial system was a true loss to the souls of the Jewish people.

Today we might take the best of each answer. On the one hand, as Rambam would argue, we might understand that God desires our words and thoughts. No fancy actions are required to connect with the Holy One. On the other hand, when we read about the sacrifices throughout the book of Vayikra, we might remember that prayer was originally designed as a full body experience. We can imagine, perhaps, that we are bringing our whole selves before God, dedicating our bodies and souls to connect as deeply as possible. The goal, then, is to find a way to offer up our best selves, in whatever way we find meaningful, and to believe that God is accepting our offering *b'ratzon*, with good will and deep, abiding love. Shabbat Shalom.