

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Heated Debate Defends Jewish Spirituality



A critic of Judaism once engaged me in a heated debate. He insisted that the book of Leviticus is devoid of a spiritual message and focuses only on the legal details of sacrifices.

This argument is dispelled by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745 -1812), who pointed out an unusual nuance in the second verse of Leviticus. Had the verse been written in

adherence to standard rules of Hebrew grammar, it would read, “*When a person from among you offers a sacrifice*” (Leviticus 1:2). However, the verse begins, “*When someone offers a sacrifice* [מִכֶּם—*mikem*] from you.”

Rabbi Shneur Zalman demonstrates that the unusual structure of this verse sets the tone for all sacrifices. He explains that the essential message of sacrifices is to come close to God. This is alluded to in the Hebrew, where the noun [קֶרְבָּן—*korban*] “*sacrifice*” and the verb [יָקְרִיב—*yakriv*] “*to offer*” also mean “*to come close*.”

Rabbi Shneur Zalman clarifies that we achieve this closeness by offering something from [מִכֶּם—*mikem*] ourselves, specifically, our animal soul that drives us and ensnares us into a pursuit of self-gratifying materialistic pleasures.

Imagine the chaos created by an out-of-control ox dragging a wagon off the road and onto private property to eat someone’s crops. Only a skilled driver can control and keep the ox on the right path. In this example, the wagon represents our body, the ox is our animal soul, and the wagon driver is our Godly soul that harnesses the raw power of the animal to lead the wagon in the right direction. So too, our Godly soul redirects [sacrifices] our animal soul to fulfill God’s will, thereby elevating the animal soul and the world around us.

Jews, first and foremost, desire to voluntarily come close to God.

Furthermore, the book of Leviticus highlights the spiritual dimension of sacrifices by discussing voluntary sacrifices before mandatory offerings. This prioritization demonstrates that the intrinsic spiritual nature of the Jews, first and foremost, desires to voluntarily come close to God rather than merely offering sacrifices to fulfill an obligation.

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Another example of redirecting material pleasures to a higher purpose is found in this week's Torah portion, *Shemini*, (Leviticus 9:1–11:47), which contains detailed introductions concerning the laws of kosher food.

The Torah identifies which animals are permissible and which are forbidden for consumption. Land animals must have split hooves and chew their cud, and fish must have fins and scales. Insects, reptiles, amphibians, and worms are forbidden except for four types of locusts. Birds are permissible except for the 24 non-Kosher species specifically listed in the Torah.

As with sacrifices, these rules may seem irrelevant and steeped in detail. However, when we delve deeper, we can derive meaningful, life-enriching, and spiritual lessons from the laws of keeping kosher.

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Animals forbidden for consumption tend to be predators and scavengers. Avoiding these types of animals reminds us to not emulate their negative character traits. Furthermore, scientific studies have upheld the famous motto, “You are what you eat,” and found that wild animals produce chemical hormones that, when absorbed, can detrimentally influence our behavior.

Following the laws of kosher enables us to refine our conduct and differentiate ourselves from animals that take whatever they want, whenever they want it. These laws form the ultimate lesson in self-control, which can be applied to many other aspects of our lives.

Keeping kosher also reminds us of the importance of humility by teaching that the world does not belong to us to do with as we please. Rather, the world belongs to God, and we can benefit only from what God permits us. As King David said, “*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it*” (Psalms 24:1).

Ultimately, we keep kosher because it is a Divine commandment [מצוה—*mitzvah*] that “connects” us to God. However, keeping kosher also enables us to fulfill the precept of [*Tikkun Olam*] repairing, or in Kabbalistic terminology, elevating the material world to a higher plane of spiritual existence.

We gain an appreciation for the Torah's rules and regulations when we recognize that they provide valuable moral lessons and lead us on a path to spiritual consciousness.

Shabbat Shalom

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