Our Place, Our Wishes: Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In his short story, “The Intelligence Office,” Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a group of people who make requests from an intelligence officer. Some are seeking worldly things, and others are seeking truths of one kind or another.

One of the clients states that he wants a place. The officer explains that there are many vacant or soon to be vacant places, but he needs more information from the petitioner as to what he is looking for.

The client responds: “I want my place! My own place! My true place in the world! My proper sphere! My thing to do, which nature intended me to perform when she fashioned me thus awry, and which I have vainly sought all my lifetime!” The intelligence officer could not satisfy his wishes and the man left dejected.

One after the other, clients expressed their wishes and goals, and one after the other their requests were logged in the record book. But no help was offered. Each person ultimately had to solve his/her own problem.

The record book of the Intelligence Office would be an amazing reflection of the needs and wishes of human beings. Hawthorne writes: “Human character in its individual developments—human nature in the mass—may best be studied in its wishes.”

What do we wish for? Good health (physical, spiritual, emotional), good family, friends, happiness, love, wholeness, self-worth, usefulness, a feeling that our lives mean something…that we each have our own unique and valued place in the world.

We are not only what we seem to be; we also are what we aspire to become, what we wish for. Ideally, we have worthy aspirations; ideally, we conduct our lives so as we can best reach toward those aspirations.

In this week’s Torah portion, we begin the book of Vayikra…and we read about many forms of sacrifices that took place in the Mishkan of the ancient Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. Obviously, their primary wish at that time would have been to enter the Promised Land and get settled there. This was a practical and sensible wish.

But the Torah emphasizes the necessity of spiritual aspirations. It describes the offerings as a way of reminding the Israelites of the primacy of their relationship with God. In order to have a proper physical place, it is vital to have a spiritual place. It is imperative to have aspirations that transcend time and space, that reach toward the Being of all beings.

One of the Hebrew terms for God is "haMakom," which means the Place. The Bereishith Rabba (68:9) indicates that haMakom connotes that "God is the place of the world, and His world is not His place." This phrase seems to mean: God encompasses the entire universe but is not limited to it. In Ezekiel's vision, the angels bless God's glory "miMekomo," from His place. His place is far beyond us…i.e. in Heaven.

The Temple sacrifices of old were a way for the Israelites to internalize a personal relationship with God. They learned to think beyond their immediate physical needs and wishes, and to place their lives in a spiritual, transcendent context.

Since the destruction of our ancient Temples in Jerusalem, our spiritual "place" has been found in our synagogues, study halls, in our homes and hearts. Our prayers— the classic liturgy of the siddur as well as our own private devotions—are a means of our finding our own place in the world. Our prayers—our wishes and aspirations—obviously relate to our physical needs. But for us truly to find our own "place" in the scheme of things, our prayers must bring us into relationship with the ultimate Place.

To paraphrase Nathaniel Hawthorne, our character as individuals may best be studied in our wishes, in our prayers and aspirations.