Spiritual Entryways: Thoughts for Parashat Vayikra

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayikra

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

My friend, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, has come out with a new book *Cardozo on the Parashah: The Book of Leviticus* (Kasva Press, 2025) in which he presents his thoughts on the weekly Torah portions. As in his many previous writings, he draws on a variety of sources—rabbinic and general—but he is also known for his original thinking.

The book of Leviticus, Vayikra, devotes much text to laws relating to the Mishkan, animal sacrifices, and the duties of the priestly class. For moderns, these passages are remote from our personal experience.

Rabbi Cardozo ponders the ultimate significance of the ancient Mishkan and Temple services. Without going into whether these things will be re-established in Messianic times, we still need to think about why they are part of our tradition altogether.

Rabbi Cardozo offers his insight: “The Temple service is not the ultimate form of worship, it is only the beginning, a foretaste of what is to come. Its purpose is to function, through metaphoric rites, as a medium through which people are stimulated to take their first steps toward an inner transformation. When Jews pray that God grant them the opportunity to bring fire offerings, this does not mean to actually bring animal sacrifices, but to be able to make ever greater spiritual contributions, of which the sacrifices were merely a foretaste.” (p. 15)

The Mishkan/Temples were not meant to be ends in themselves but were intended to be entryways into spiritual growth. Similarly, the many mitzvoth of the Torah are not the goals of religious life but are vehicles to bring us closer to the Divine.

When religion prods us to higher levels of faith, love and righteousness, it is of vital importance to us as individuals and to humanity as a whole. When religion is abused by fostering hatred, violence, and cult-like behavior, it is destructive to individuals and to society. Religion can be—and should be—the most elevating element of human civilization. But, as we unfortunately know, it can also be the root cause of extremism, terrorism, and war.

Perhaps the ancient Temple services serve to remind us of the need for religious humility. We come before the Lord with sacrifices as a symbolic way of demonstrating our subservience to the ultimate Divine and our need to strive daily for spiritual growth. Today, our synagogues should be serving this purpose—to remind us to come before the Lord humbly, with pure hearts, with sincere desire to strive

for righteous and wise lives.

Our biblical prophets inveighed against sacrifices that were brought in a cult-like pattern without the proper intellectual and spiritual framework. If Temple services—and prayer services—are performed mechanically and without proper intent, they become a mockery rather than expressions of religiosity.

The Hebrew word for the Temple sacrifice is “korban.” The root letters of the word mean “drawing near.” Sacrifices—and prayer—are intended to draw us into a closer, more intense relationship with the Almighty. They are not ends in themselves but are entryways to a more spiritual life.