Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Vayikra

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Vayikra:

***Korbanot*: Humans Approaching God, God Dwelling among Humans**

Introduction

Parashat Vayikra opens the Torah's detailed discussion of *korbanot*, the sacrificial service that stood at the center of Israel's religious life in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. The word *korban* derives from the Hebrew root *karov*, meaning "to draw near." A *korban* is not simply a sacrifice in the conventional sense, but an offering that enables a person to approach God.

For modern readers, the institution of sacrifices often appears distant or difficult to understand. Classical Jewish thinkers therefore devoted great effort to explaining their meaning and purpose. Two complementary perspectives illuminate the institution of *korbanot*. One emphasizes the human dimension: sacrifices express the worshipper's desire to draw closer to God through submission, devotion, and repentance. The other focuses on the divine dimension: the sacrificial service sustains the presence of God among Israel through the sacred institutions of the Tabernacle and Temple.

Together, these perspectives frame *korbanot* as a meeting point between heaven and earth—where human beings approach God, and God in turn chooses to dwell among His people.

Perspective I — Humans Approaching God

Many commentators understand sacrifices primarily as expressions of human devotion and submission.

Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and others explain that a *korban* symbolically represents the individual who brings it. Through the laying of hands, slaughter, and burning of the offering, the worshipper confronts the reality that what is being done to the animal could just as well have been done to him. The animal serves as a substitute, dramatizing the gravity of human accountability before the Divine.

Rabbi Saadiah Gaon offers another explanation that also centers on the human experience of worship. Human beings naturally express devotion through giving gifts. *Korbanot* channel that instinct toward God, transforming a basic human impulse into an act of religious service.

Perspective II — God Dwelling among Humans

A second perspective shifts the focus from human devotion to divine presence.

Ramban explains that the Tabernacle extends the revelation of Sinai into an ongoing reality. At Sinai, God’s Presence descended upon the mountain for a brief moment of unparalleled revelation. The Tabernacle—and the sacrificial service performed within it—ensures that this presence continues to dwell among Israel.

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi expresses a similar idea in the *Kuzari* (II:25–26), where he describes the Temple service as one of the central means through which the Divine Presence rests upon the nation.

The Torah itself underscores this idea through its language. Sacrifices are repeatedly described as “a fire-offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord.” The sacrificial service is presented not simply as a human expression of devotion but as an act that is welcomed by God Himself.

The Debate between Rambam and Ramban

Medieval Jewish thinkers also debated a deeper question: why did God command sacrifices at all?

Rambam (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:32) argues that sacrifices were historically necessary in the ancient world. Religious worship everywhere involved sacrificial rituals, and people would not have been able to conceive of divine service without them. God therefore commanded sacrifices as part of a gradual educational process, redirecting an existing practice toward monotheistic service.

The Torah also restricted sacrifices to a single sanctuary and to a designated priesthood, thereby preventing the proliferation of pagan-style rituals. Over time, Rambam suggests, more elevated forms of worship—such as prayer and intellectual contemplation—would become central.

Ramban strongly rejects this explanation. If sacrifices were merely a concession to human weakness, he argues, the Torah would not devote such extensive attention to their laws or describe them as pleasing to God. Moreover, sacrifice existed long before idolatry: Cain and Abel, Noah, and the Patriarchs all brought offerings to God.

The Prophetic Balance

Despite their central role in the Temple service, the prophets repeatedly warn that sacrifices alone cannot sustain the relationship between God and Israel.

Samuel declares that obedience is greater than sacrifice (I Samuel 15:22). Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and the psalmists all insist that God rejects offerings when they are accompanied by injustice and corruption.

The prophets do not abolish sacrifices; rather, they insist that ritual worship must be accompanied by righteous conduct. Sacrifices are part of divine service, but they can never replace justice, compassion, and humility.

Conclusion — Meeting Between Heaven and Earth

Seen through these lenses, *korbanot* emerge as a profound meeting point between God and humanity.

On one level, sacrifices allow human beings to approach God with humility, devotion, and repentance. On another level, they sustain the divine presence among Israel through the sacred institutions of the Tabernacle and Temple.

The prophets remind us that these two dimensions must operate together. Ritual worship without moral responsibility loses its meaning, while ethical life without devotion risks losing its spiritual foundation.

In Parashat Vayikra, the Torah teaches that authentic religious life requires both movements at once: human beings striving to draw closer to God, and God choosing to dwell among His people.