

What's The Best Way To Serve G-d? (Edited Transcript)

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Our parsha this week, Vayikra, starts the third of the Five Books of the Chumash and deals with the service in the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple. The parsha begins with the topic of the offerings in the Temple. The verse says Adam ki yakriv korban laHashem ?If a person comes to bring an offering to G-d.? The verse uses the word adam for ?person? though normally the Chumash uses the word ish. Furthermore, this word adam is emphasised: if you look at the trop, the cantillation marks in the Chumash, above the word adam you will find a dot called a reviv, which draws attention to this word, adam.

The Midrash says that the word adam refers not just to any ordinary person but to Adam, Adam HaRishon, the very first human being who ever lived. The key to understanding what the service of G-d entails - in the offerings in the Temple and in general - is to first understand Adam and Eve.

The universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity

Adam and Eve teach us a number of things about the service of G-d. Firstly, they teach us about the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. The Mishnah asks why human beings all come from one father and one mother - Adam and Eve - unlike the animals and the species of the plant kingdom which were created en mass. One of the answers the Talmud gives is to eliminate racism; had there been numerous original ancestors, everyone would say his ancestor is greater than the other's. And so, G-d created us all from the same ancestors to teach us that human beings are all brothers and sisters. Despite this, people still sink to racism; just imagine how much worse it would be had we come from multiple ancestors.

Adam, alluding to the first human being, is all about the universality of humans. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch links this with the fact that offerings in the Temple were brought not only by Jews, but by gentiles as well. Anyone who wanted to bring an offering in the Jews' Temple in the Holy City of Jerusalem was welcome to do so. As the prophet Isaiah says, Hashem says Ki beiti beit tefilla yikareh lechol ha'amim ?My house will be a house of prayer for all the nations.? Thus, this word adam teaches us about the universality of every human being serving G-d.

Self-motivation in serving G-d

The second thing we learn from Adam is how to serve G-d. The Kli Yakar discusses how Adam's children - the most infamous siblings in history, Kayin and Hevel, Cain and Abel - tried to serve G-d. They both brought offerings, but each had his own flaws. Kayin didn't bring the best of his crops to Hashem. When we come to serve Hashem, we have to give Him our best. Hashem favoured Hevel's offering and Kayin was jealous. Hevel's flaw was that he brought an offering only after he saw his brother doing so; he wasn't self-motivated. Often we keep up with others, not only in material things but in spiritual things as well; we do something solely because someone else is doing it and not because we are self-motivated. The Kli Yakar explains that we learn from the use of the word adam that just as Adam, the first human being in the world, had no one to be jealous of and no one with whom to compete, whose point of reference was only Hashem and himself and he didn't worry about what anyone else was doing (because there was no one else), so too when we come to serve G-d we must serve Him like Adam HaRishon, focusing only on G-d and not on what the rest of the world is doing.

Service of G-d and ethical behaviour toward our fellow human beings

The third thing we learn from Adam is that our service of G-d must be ethical. Rashi quotes the Midrash which says adam is referring to Adam HaRishon. When he brought his offerings to G-d there was no theft involved because he was the only person around, there was no one from whom to steal. So too, when one brought an offering to G-d in the Temple, it was not allowed to be

from stolen property.

But in truth, who would do such a thing? The Kli Yakar explains Rashi's words and says that we are not talking about someone who brings stolen goods to the Temple because that would be so obviously wrong. Rather, we are talking about a person who lives an unethical life, whose business practices are dishonest and result in a lot of ill-gotten gain. Some of their wealth may have been earned honestly, but there are lots of things that were earned unethically. When such a person brings an offering, it is an abomination to G-d. The prophet Isaiah speaks out about this in the first chapter of Isaiah, where G-d says to the people don't bring me offerings when your hands are dripping with the blood of injustice. We certainly can't serve G-d if our behaviour toward others is unjust and unethical because we have an obligation to keep the **whole** Torah - the mitzvos bein adam laMakom, between man and G-d, as well as the mitzvos bein adam lachaveiro, between man and his fellow man.

This concept is quite subtle and yet profound. Sometimes religious passion can cause a person to overlook basic sensitivity to another human being. One of the great masters of sensitivity to all human beings was Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement which was a great philosophical school of thought started in the 19th century. By personal example, Rav Yisrael Salanter taught the importance of ethical conduct. For example, he was once hosted by one of his students on a Friday night and he said to the student that he is prepared to come only if he ensures the meal doesn't take too long. The student didn't understand this request, but he obliged. After the meal, Rav Yisrael explained to him that the cook who was serving all the food was a widow, and surely she wants to get home to her family as quickly as possible. The longer you keep her, the later her own Shabbos meal will begin. Rav Yisrael said it's all very well to have such a holy Shabbos experience, but not at the expense of another.

There is another well-known example: Rav Yisrael was once visiting a different city and many people came to daven where he was davening, so that they could see the great sage. It was Mincha time. The people were very surprised to see that he davened quite a quick Mincha. Afterwards, they asked him why he prayed so quickly. He explained that he noticed lots of workers - day labourers and traders - who had taken off from work and come to daven Mincha to see him, and he didn't want them to lose time off of their work which would result in harm to their parnassa.

When we come to serve G-d, we must ensure that our actions toward G-d and toward our fellow human beings are consistent with each other. Keeping G-d's Torah means keeping **all** of it, not just the mitzvos between us and Him but between us and our fellow human beings. We must ensure that everything we do is done with sensitivity, kindness, care and consideration for others and that everything we do is permeated with the ethics of the Torah.

The Torah is the guide for how to serve G-d

This brings us to the final point on Adam.. The opening passage of the parsha deals with a free-will offering. As we know, some of the offerings in the Temple were obligatory but this passage is referring to a voluntary one, brought out of one's own volition, with passion and fervour. When Adam came to serve G-d he had one major disadvantage: he didn't have a Torah. He just came to serve G-d out of desire to be close to G-d, but he didn't have a Torah to guide him. When we come to serve G-d, we have to come with the same fervour as Adam but we must also follow the Torah's guidelines. The parsha is saying that when we approach the service of G-d, we must do so in the context of the Torah's guidelines. We begin like Adam, but then there are volumes of Hashem's wisdom written in the Torah for what we must do.

One of the most unique and important teachings of Judaism is that we can't just intuit how to be a spiritual or a moral person. The Torah is a blueprint for life which guides us as to how to be spiritual and ethical. We can't just work things out by ourselves; we must follow the guidelines of the Torah.

The Kuzari, one of the classic works of Jewish philosophy written by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi in the Middle Ages, explains this further. The book is structured as a debate between the King of Khazar and a great Torah sage. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi writes that all people have good intentions and try and be spiritually connected, but that without the guidance on how to do it, it is impossible. A person who just wants to serve G-d by intuition, says Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, is comparable to a fool who comes to a medicine cabinet of a doctor who is famous for his ability to heal the sick. The doctor is not in, and many people have gathered in his office to

receive medicine, so the fool proceeds to dispense the medication to the patients without knowing which medicines are intended for which sickness and in what dosage. As a result he kills the patients with the very same medicines that could have been used to heal them. If by chance one person is healed by a particular medicine, everyone else will clamour for that same medication, thinking that it will cure all of their ills. This will continue until, by chance, they find another medicine that heals them. They do not realise that the real remedy is the prescription of the wise doctor who mixes the compounds and knows exactly what and how much to dispense to each patient.

The Torah is what dispenses medicine - a way of life - from the Ultimate Doctor, the One Who created us all and knows what's good for us. If a person decides on his own what is spiritual and how to be ethical and moral, that is not called serving G-d. We need guidance, and that is the great privilege in having the Torah; it guides us every step of the way on what to do and how to do it.

The book of Vayikra, which we are about to begin, is about service in the Temple but more broadly it is about the service of G-d in general. And so it begins with Adam ki yakriv; if a person comes to bring an offering to G-d, he or she should do so as though they are like Adam, the first Adam, in serving G-d: we must recognize the universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings; we must be self-motivated; we must come completely clean from an ethical point of view; and we must be willing to be guided by the Torah as to how to serve G-d.