

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



HANDS ON

Vayikra

This week we begin reading the book of Vayikra. The subject matter, at least for the first 17 chapters, is challenging because we are discussing the rituals surrounding the bringing of offerings in the Mishkan and, later, the Beit HaMikdash. Please, forgive me for this observation, but even though many of us pray fervently for the rebuilding of our Holy Temple in Yerushalayim, most of us know precious little about the details of the workings of our national sacred shrine. So, I will endeavor to shed some light on one detail of those myriad instructions.

I think that when most people think about the Beit HaMikdash they immediately conjure up ideas of grandeur and pomp. We have visions of the column of smoke rising steadily and majestically heavenward. We close our eyes and breathe in the pleasing fragrance of the KETORET (incense). Cool! But is that perception an accurate depiction of the scene? Maybe, but I'm not sure. Allow me to parse a PASUK in this week's parsha which I believe

strongly conjures a totally different reality.

The fourth verse in Vayikra goes like this: He shall press (Rav Kaplan; most others 'lay') his hand on the head of the burnt offering (Vayikra 1:4). Our first image of the process is very intimate; not grandiose at all. Press your hand to the head of the animal to be slaughtered, feel the life coursing through this animal and then hand it over for slaughter.

The verse concludes: that it may be acceptable on your behalf, in expiation (atonement) for you. So, the offering is meant to be a KAPARA, an atonement for some sin. But what kind of transgression? The Ramban asked for which sin does this offering bring atonement. He suggests: the burnt-offering only comes to effect atonement for sinful thoughts of the heart. The reason why the burnt-offering was singled out for this purpose is because it is a sin that no one recognizes except God, Who knows our secret thoughts; therefore it is wholly burnt to God.

When a Jew discovers that he has definitely committed a sin by mistake, he brings a CHATAT (sin offering). When a Jew is presented with a situation where it is impossible to determine if a sin was committed; he brings an ASHAM (guilt offering).

This burnt offering will bestow atonement even for sins which are unknown to the person. It's sort of 'just in case'.

So, the individual has brought this offering without any concrete catalyst. The person wants to strengthen his connection with God. This connection seems to be achieved by the S'MICHAT YADAYIM ('laying on' of hands) - but what is this process? Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch suggests: The essential implication of the term S'MICHA is to 'support' an object or to 'lean' upon an object. It always means a strong contact... We can explain the phenomenon in this way: The YAD of the person bringing the offering has been weakened by the transgression of a sin of commission (of a sin) or omission (positive mitzva not fulfilled), and now this person empowers his hand, through the decision of his heart and expressed by the offering, which is placed upon the head of the animal to commit himself to never sinning with that hand again. He will again be fully committed to mitzvot.

This energetic act by the supplicant produces a connection to the animal and to the act. That brings us back to the word S'MICHA. Its root is SOMEICH, which means to 'lean on' or 'depend upon'. It is the idea of the verse: The Lord SOMEICH (helps,

upholds, supports, sustains, holds up) all who stumble (T'hilim 145:13). SOMEICH requires a powerful effort. Something of moment has occurred.

I'd like to think that the individual pressing down with all their might is transformed by this experience. A different person emerges from this process.

The Talmud asks how this process is done, and declares: The animal is in the north side of the courtyard and is facing west, and so is the SOMEICH. He presses both hands on its horns with nothing in between (Yoma 36a). Why north and west? Because those are the most secluded sides of the Mikdash. The main entrance is in the South and the famous gate used on Yom Kippur for the goat to go to the desert is on the East. The supplicant must be in the most private spot for this ceremony, finding privacy and solitude in this otherwise most public venue.

Remarkable. Our parsha presents us with this most intimate Jewish practice. I find this fascinating in light of the fact that we read this just before Purim (this year). And what is the dramatic turning point in that story? When Esther demands of Mordechai: Go, gather all the Jews who are in Shushan and tell them to give up eating to help me be brave.

They aren't to eat or drink anything for three whole days, and I myself will do the same, along with my female servants. Then, even though it is against the law, I will go to the king; and if I am to die, then die I will (Esther 4:16).

The irony is huge. When our ancestors possessed the world's greatest shrine, the most impactful event was personal and private. When we had been exiled and scattered, the consummate moment was massive, total public unity.

Today our people is challenged again. This new Haman or Amalek tests our resolve. Only total unity will suffice to defeat this menace: YACHAD N'NATZEI'ACH! Please, God, we shall soon commemorate this achievement in private intimacy with Maker in our rebuilt Beit HaMikdash. 