

Shabbat Parashat Vayiqra/Shabbat Hahodesh
Getting Close to God Using the Jewish Time Machine

When I visit classrooms or discuss the TaNaKH/Hebrew Bible with our students, one of the questions that I most often get is, “Why don’t we have the same kind of relationship with God that the Israelites had?” In the stories that we read in the TaNaKH, our forefathers and foremothers literally heard the voice of God. They experienced acts of God. God’s cloud and pillar of fire provided them with shade, protection, light, and a constant reminder of the divine presence throughout their journey through the wilderness. The relationship between God and the people of Israel was “close.” It was tangible. There was visual, auditory, and emotional evidence of God’s existence every single day. Our children wonder, why isn’t it the same way for us? How can we get close to God like that?

This week, we read from two separate Torah portions out of two Torah scrolls as we begin our reading from *Sefer Vayiqra*/Leviticus, the third book of the Torah. Each in its own way, these two readings help to answer these questions about how we can work to build a closeness with God that approaches what it was like for the children of Israel in the Bible. First, in the regular weekly reading from *parashat* Vayiqra, the list and procedures for the many different sacrificial offerings that could be made to God in the *Mishkan*/Tabernacle and later in the two Temples are given. What helps us to understand the connection between sacrifices and building a closeness to God is the Hebrew word that means “sacrifice” itself. In Hebrew, the root letters for the word are Q (*quf*). R (*reish*). V (*vet*). The literal meaning of this root is indeed “to be/get close.” From a close reading and understanding of the Hebrew, we learn that it is through the deliberate act of communicating with God (be it through sacrifice, as it was in the ancient world, or prayer, its replacement since the time of the destruction of the Second Temple) that we are able to “come close” to God and establish a relationship with the divine. However, as we learn from the famous story of Nachshon ben Aminadav who, according to the Midrash, walked neck-deep into the water of the Sea of Reeds before it was split, it is up to us to make the approach, reach out and seek the connection. We must take the initiative. And as we learn from the many different types of sacrifices and themes of prayer, all reasons or inspirations for communication are welcome and available.

It is not through sacrifice/prayer alone that one is able to achieve closeness to God. As we learn from our second Torah reading this week, it is also by traveling through the time portal of Jewish history and experience that we succeed at this goal. What is this Jewish “time machine” to which I am referring? It is not a DeLorean car or any other type of “craft.” Rather, it is the Jewish festivals. Each Jewish holiday is intended to transport us back to the original historical experience that inspired the celebration of a festival. From Torah scroll #2 this week, we read about the instructions for the celebration of the very first Passover Seder on the eve of our Exodus from Egypt. Each year, we reread this passage on the Shabbat that coincides with the week of Rosh Chodesh/New Month Celebration of the Hebrew month of Nisan, which falls two weeks before the Passover festival. The rituals that are

included in the Seder are intended to serve not only as reminders for us of what happened to our people 3300 years ago, but also to have each of us personally attempt to relive the experience of the Exodus, thus feeling the power of God's redemption ourselves. In fact, the Haggadah instructs us: "In every generation, each person is obligated to see her/him self as if s/he went out from Egypt." How better to try to accomplish this feat than by eating the same foods, dressing in the same costumes, telling our children the same stories? At the time of each Jewish festival, if we engage in and relive the ritual experiences of our fore-parents and ancestors, we will have the chance to achieve the same closeness of relationship to God that was part of their lives.

As we read of the sacrificial offerings and formally begin our countdown to Passover this year, may we all find the words and rituals that will allow us to gain better closeness to God.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Kasher v'Samei'ah!/Happy and Kosher Passover!