

Samuel F.'s D'var Torah — April 1, 2006

I would like to begin by thanking all of you who have chosen to spend this April fools day with my family and me. I would like to thank my all of my relatives for coming from all parts of the world to be with me today. I would like to thank my teachers from Kadima with special thanks to Andy Benjamin, Nancy Gruber, and Vered.

I want to give a special thanks to Susan Kane who helped me via phone sessions on Monday nights, preparing trope for me and my family, and for coming out from Boston to make this a wonderful day.

I would also like to thank Sharron Lerner who spent countless hours preparing me for my Bar Mitzvah. Sharron is a great teacher who prepared me not only in Hebrew, but she also asked me to question and think about the rituals of Judaism.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my brother Max, and my sister Sarah.

The Torah portion I read from is Vayikra. This portion is the first chapter in the book of Vayikra, which is known as Leviticus in English. In my Torah portion God calls Moshe, also known as Moses, and instructs him to tell the Jewish people to sacrifice. God goes into detail on how the different types of sacrifices are supposed to happen. For example, God tells Moshe to tell the Jewish people about the number of times you are supposed to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificed animal on the alter when the whole congregation of Yisra'el sins through ignorance. Or which parts of the cow you are supposed to burn first when making a peace offering. In some ways this is all there is to Vayikra, describing the laws of korbanot or sacrifices. And yet as Rabbi Steven Pik- Nathan put it, Vayikra is a central theme of Torah. He said that Vayikra gives us structure and a path to follow in the search for G-d. I am going to talk about two ideas that relate to this search. The first is kavanah and the second is transition. The transition from sacrifice to prayer, and also the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Back in the time of The Temple when the Jewish people were sacrificing animals, this parsha, or portion of the Torah, was a very good thing to have around. Who was going to remember all of the different ways in which you were supposed to kill the animal and cut it up? However since the destruction of The Second Temple in the year 70 by the Romans, we do not do sacrifice anymore. Prayer has replaced the sacrificing of animals. So wouldn't you think that the detail in which this portion is written should carry over to prayer?

The Hebrew word "kavanah" means "doing with intention". If the person, who was sacrificing, followed all of the rules and guidelines for his or her sacrifice they would be doing that sacrifice with kavanah. They would be doing the sacrifice with the intention of getting closer to god. If all the details are supposed to carry over from sacrifice to prayer then shouldn't every prayer that you say, whether it be at a Friday night service, Shabbat Bar or Bat Mitzvah or any other service for that matter, be said and done with kavanah?

Also, when you do something that you put your best effort into it is considered to be done with kavanah. There is a good feeling that comes when you approach life with kavanah. For example, if you were to sacrifice, as in give something up like money for tzadakah or time volunteering, and you felt it made a difference, you not only give someone something, but you also make yourself feel better. This of course is following a path by sacrifice that hopefully will lead to good a life.

(Pause) The destruction of The Temple by the Romans marks the transition from sacrifice to prayer for the Jewish people. Following the destruction of the temple, the rabbis met in Yavneh to discuss what the Jewish people were going to do to replace sacrifice. They discussed, planned, and finally completed the siddur or prayer book. When it was completed we had a structure for saying prayer. It seems to me that the rabbis recreated a different form of sacrifice. Although they didn't kill animals anymore, they did have a structure and an ordered way in which getting closer to God was to happen.

Vayikra reminds us that there is structure, rules, and laws we live by. The meaning of the word "Siddur" comes from the same root as the word "order". In every siddur there is a structure to the service.

In a Shabbat morning service there are many parts. As the service starts people are entering and getting settled. The morning prayers are supposed to wake us up, and prepare us for the rest of the service. Eventually we arrive at the Shema. The Shema is the prayer that expresses the central belief of the Jewish people. Following the Shema is the Amida. This section is meant to be a time of deep reflection. Next we move into the Torah portion, a time to grapple with the Torah's lessons that are still being passed down from generation to generation even today. Finally we end with the closing prayers. This idea of communicating with God, through the elaborate structure of prayer, is supposed to make us feel better about ourselves, when it is done with kavanah.

In the Jewish tradition turning thirteen marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Childhood is bound by rules, much as the rules in Vayikra describe the laws of sacrifice. Everything is organized and explained in a very detailed way. When you are young everything is laid out for you. Your clothes, hairstyle, food, school, and time that you must be in bed are some of the many things that you don't have much control over as a young child. This is like sacrifice because when a sacrifice was to be done, there was a very specific way in which you were supposed to do your sacrifice. Like childhood you didn't have much control over what happened.

I feel that prayer is like adulthood. When you are an adult there is more responsibility put on your shoulders. In Jewish tradition, before the age of thirteen, all of the sins that a child commits are the responsibilities of the child's father. When that child turns thirteen their sins are now their responsibility. The good side of being an adult is the choice. You can choose what you are going to wear and what you will have for dinner. Like the structure of prayer, there are the responsibilities of adulthood, but with those responsibilities come the many choices you have inside the boundaries.

Prayer, I feel, is more internal than sacrifice. When you say a prayer there are certain words that are supposed to be said, but those words can be chanted, sung, thought, whispered, or any other way someone can think up. When a sacrifice was to be done it had a very specific way in which you were supposed to go about it. For example, I was recently at a Bat Mitzvah where the cantor was telling us about a song we were going to sing. She said that it came from Spanish Jews would had some more difficult rhythms. If we still were sacrificing the priest who was conducting the sacrifice couldn't have been talking about the Spanish Jews who did their sacrifice differently because there would be only one correct way of doing sacrifice.

I think that this is another reason why God chose for the Jewish people to first have sacrifice and then prayer. Sacrifice was like the normal, less complicated rhythm, which was an easily laid out way of getting closer to God. Once the Jews were able to get the hang of these normal rhythms,

doing everything in the same way, God decided to give them a more interesting way of getting closer to God. Prayer was a devise that enabled the Jewish people to have a very mellow and internal way of getting closer to God, like the Amidah section, and have fun at the same time.

I know that at many services I have just said the words of the prayers, and I didn't really think about it - in other words I did this without kavanah. I am sure that all of us have done this in the past whether it was in prayer, studies, or sports. I hope that after listening to this D'var you take with you the notion of approaching life with kavanah, with intention.

Shabbat Shalom everybody and thank you for spending the day with me