
It's the Thought That Counts

The enumeration of korbanos continues into this week's parashah. Let us examine some of the underlying philosophical issues of korbanos, and some of the reasons behind them. The word korban is usually translated as "sacrifice." This translation, however, reflects only part of its real meaning. The root of the word is karev, which means "to draw near." The idea is that one who brings an offering to Hashem is actually bringing himself closer to Him. This is seen in an idea of Rav Dessler. Any interaction between human beings involves either giving or taking. Some people are more giving types, while others are of the more taking persuasion. Rav Dessler asks, When a person gives a gift to another, which would have greater feelings of love for the other, the giver or the receiver? Most people would think the receiver has greater feelings of love, since he benefits from and appreciates the present. Rav Dessler tells us that in fact the giver has the greater feelings of love. The effort he exerts and the thoughts involved will lead to a greater feeling of love for the recipient. The same is true of a parent-child relationship. There is no end to what parents do for their children, while what children do for their parents is more limited. Under such circumstances, the parent will have greater feelings for the child, the recipient of the love, than the child has for the parent. Similarly, when one gives a sacrifice, the effort involved in selecting an appropriate animal and offering the sacrifice will arouse in him great feelings of attachment, love and closeness to Hashem. By giving one becomes closer.

Business or Pleasure?

While the giver will become closer to Hashem because of his offering, we have to examine the clues we are given concerning how Hashem reacts to our offerings. Regarding many of the sacrifices, the Torah says about them, "a pleasing fragrance to Hashem." Rashi comments that it is a source of contentment to Hashem, because He commanded, and His will was carried out. On the other hand, the verse says, "Why do I need your numerous sacrifices?" (Yeshayah 1:11). This would seem to contradict the previous scriptural description of the sacrifices. The following parable will answer this apparent contradiction. There was once a storekeeper who had taken over his father's shop. There was one man in the town who was a big customer of his father but had never done any business with the son. The son was greatly bothered by this and sent friends of his to subtly suggest he come, but to no avail. Eventually he confronted the man and asked him, "Why is it you never even set foot into my shop, when once you were a frequent customer of my father?" The man replied that he would try to come in frequently. So it was, every week he would come in, inquire after the shopkeeper's health and the well-being of his family, but do no business with him. Eventually the shopkeeper snapped at him, "Do you think when I complained to you, I just wanted you to come and say hello and make nice conversation? It was your business that I wanted." Similarly, Hashem isn't interested that when we visit the Beis Hamikdash to make sacrifices, we just "say hello" to Him, and go through the motions. Rather, we must make the sacrifice a more meaningful experience.

Cheap Ingredients

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky illustrates this point differently. The minchah offering that was taken from the first produce was to be brought from barley. Why is such a low-quality ingredient used as a sacrifice in the Beis Hamikdash? Surely the prime purpose of barley is for animal fodder. Secondly, barley is used in the offering of the sotah (the suspected adulteress). This was to show that just as her actions were animal-like, so should be her offering. How could it be that the Torah mandates such a low-quality offering? The answer is that the Torah wishes to show that Hashem has no need for our sacrifices, as it says in Yeshayah, "Why do I need your numerous sacrifices?" If all the sacrifices were to be of expensive ingredients, one may have mistakenly thought that Hashem has a need for our sacrifices and their ingredients. The Torah actually sets out a sliding scale of sacrifices so that the rich can offer an animal, while the poor can offer mere birds or even flour. We see that it's the act of giving, our becoming closer to Him that really counts, regardless of the actual ingredients. It is really the giver who has the most to gain from the experience.