

MARCH 27, 2017

Parashat Vayikra

Money Well Spent

An offering to the Lord (Leviticus 1:2)

קרבן לה' (ויקרא א:ב)

In his book *Words that Work*, popular pollster Frank Luntz explains that words can change meaning over time. He writes (p. 50), “Words that had certain definitions when your grandparents were your age may have an entirely different meaning today.” Take, for example, the word “sacrifice,” which we find numerous times in the book of Leviticus. The English word ‘sacrifice’ comes from two Latin roots, *sacer*, meaning “sacred,” and *facere*, meaning “to make” or “to do.” Thus, ‘sacrifice’ used to mean, ‘to make sacred’. But that’s not the implication and understanding that we have of the word today. Professor Joshua Berman of Bar Ilan University [explains](#) in his book *The Temple* (p. 115) that with the rise of Christianity, the word “sacrifice” took on an entirely different meaning, as Christian teaching promoted the value of renunciation without any expectation of recompense as a religious act. “This connotation that the early Church fathers gave to the word sacrifice has given rise to its secular meaning today, which is synonymous with forfeiture.” Today, to many people the word sacrifice has a negative connotation, of giving up something without getting anything in return. Who would want to do that?

The Torah, on the other hand, does not speak of sacrifices in the modern sense. Rather, Vayikra describes *korbanot*, usually translated as “sacrifices,” but certainly not in the modern sense. The word *korban* is derived from the word *karov*, meaning, “close.” *Da’at Mikra* (on Leviticus 1:2) explains the term to refer to geographical closeness, as Jews were required to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to offer a ritual sacrifice. The Midrash offers a more spiritual explanation for the term. “Why is it called Korban? It is because one [who makes an offering] draws his soul close to the Creator.” (*Yalkut Teimani*) Berman writes that the Hebrew word *korban* “literally means ‘that which has been brought close’ and it refers to the sacrifice as something that enters into God’s presence in the Sanctuary. To offer a sacrifice is termed *le-hakriv korban* - literally, ‘to bring the sacrifice close’... symbolic of the emotional and spiritual stance of the Jew as he attempts to come closer to his maker.” Today we don’t offer sacrifices in our worship. But we certainly do, in the original sense of the word, “make things sacred.” Our yearning for holiness has not changed; the meaning of the word has. Few wish to sacrifice when it means “giving up something of value.” We all, however, willingly “sacrifice” when it means, “doing something holy.”

In the United States, another common term, foreign aid, now seems to suffer from the same fate, as it has seemingly taken on a negative connotation in recent months. This month, the Trump Administration released its “[America First](#)” [budget proposal](#) for the coming fiscal year, which would slash funding for the U.S. State Department and foreign aid programs by almost 30 percent. In an article responding to the proposed cuts called, “[How Foreign Aid Helps Americans](#),” former Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates argues that slashing US foreign aid would be a mistake. “These projects keep Americans safe. And by promoting health, security, and economic opportunity, they stabilize vulnerable parts of the world.” According to Gates, American aid helped prevent the spread of the deadly Ebola virus last year, saving thousands of lives. It has also kept millions of people around the world alive through its HIV and AIDS treatment and prevention programs. But Gates points out that while American aid of course helps millions around the world, it also brings tangible benefit to the United States. Many formerly AIDS-ravaged countries now enjoy stability, growth, and a dramatic reduction in violence, which is critical to our interests. American aid also “strengthens markets for U.S. goods: of our top 15 trade partners, 11 are former aid recipients.”

As supporters of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship, we recognize the special importance of the foreign aid budget. Military assistance to Israel represents an important investment in American interests in the volatile Middle East, as U.S. aid enables Israel to maintain stability in the world's most volatile region. As Israel is the one reliable, democratic ally that the United States can consistently rely on, American aid to Israel helps give Israel the resources it needs to remain strong and deter any combination of forces arrayed against it. Bill Gates notes that foreign aid "represents less than 1 percent of the federal budget, not even a penny out of every dollar. It is some of the best return on investment anywhere in government." Perhaps we need to stop calling it "Foreign Aid." Frank Luntz would probably suggest calling it "Foreign Investment." After all, that's really what it is. ■

Meaningless Sacrifices

An offering to the Lord (Leviticus 1:2)

קרבן לה' (ויקרא א:ב)

While Parashat Vayikra focuses exclusively on the technical details of the sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle, Rabbi Benzion Firrer (see *Hegyonah Shel Torah* vol. 3 p. 15) points out that the sacrifices were meaningful only if they represented an external expression of internal spiritual and emotional growth. Maimonides writes (see *Laws of Repentance* Chapter 1), "Those who bring sin offerings or guilt offerings must also [confess their sins] when they bring their sacrifices for their inadvertent or willful transgressions. Their sacrifices will not atone for their sins until they repent and make a verbal confession." Rabbi Firrer suggests that rather than simply being a tool for atonement for the past, a sacrifice represents a guarantee of future improvement. He writes, "The sacrifice is meant to influence the person who brings the offering to improve his behavior in the future. The sacrifice is not a form of compensation for the past, but rather a guarantee of sorts that the evil behavior will not be repeated." Understood in this manner, if a person offers a sacrifice without any accompanying emotional transformation, the sacrifice is rendered meaningless.

Like the sacrifices in ancient times, many actions today carry true meaning only when they are accompanied by a sense of internal change and a desire to move forward and not repeat the mistakes of the past. This is especially true with regard to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the international community reached with Iran. When the agreement was reached to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the removal of biting economic sanctions, the Obama Administration acknowledged that the deal, which expires in fifteen years, could ultimately allow Iran to legally get within days of having the material for the core of a nuclear weapon. The United States hoped that the external agreement represented an internal Iranian change of heart. The world reached the agreement with Iran hoping that it represented the first step in a process of normalization with the international community, and that Iran would reconsider its hostility towards the United States and the rest of the world. It now seems clear that those hopes were sadly misplaced.

Since the signing of the JCPOA last year, scarcely a week has passed without new instances of malign Iranian behavior. Iran's leadership has prompted a litany of aggressions in pursuit of Tehran's revolutionary aspirations to dominate the Middle East and eject American influence, which pose a dangerous threat to the stability of the Middle East. These activities include ballistic missile tests in defiance of UN Security Council demands, support for terrorists like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, as well as numerous violations of United Nations arms embargoes. Last week, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned that, "Tehran is 'completely ready' to restart its nuclear program if the U.S. fails to live up to its commitments under the July 2015 nuclear deal," the [Times of Israel reported](#). He said that, "[Iran] could do so very quickly if the agreement falls through, and the restored nuclear program would be more advanced than the one mostly frozen by the 2015 deal. 'During the past couple of months, with the efforts made by skilled Iranian scientists and experts, we have succeeded [in making] operational the most advanced centrifuges, that were just an idea at the time of approving the JCPOA.'"

Iran has made it clear that it never had a change of heart, nor does it intend to move towards any type of moderation. Just as a sacrifice without repentance carries no true meaning, we must begin to wonder whether the nuclear agreement with Iran is having any real effect on the Islamic regime, or just giving it the economic wherewithal to rebuild itself as it prepares for the time when it will build a nuclear weapon to threaten the world. ■