

I learned last week that in the past, sermons at shul were given only twice a year—on Shabbat Shuva and the Shabbat before Pesach. That’s how this Shabbat got its name, Shabbat HaGadol—because the service was extra long. Not to worry, this will be a very short d’var Torah, as I know everyone wants to get home and rest before the seder tonight.

In last week’s parashah we were given an introduction to the sacrifices that served as the main form of worship in pre-rabbinic Israelite religion—their main types or categories, the reasons for each, their salient characteristics. The opening aliyot of today’s parashah comprise a more detailed report of the rules and procedures to be followed when offering each type of sacrifice—a professional manual for the kohanim.

I want to briefly make a few observations.

For me, the main thing that stands out as I read through the first few aliyot is the link between sacrifices and eating. One of the things that concerns our instruction manual deeply is making clear which sacrifices are to be given wholly to God and which are to be shared between God and man; and in the latter case, which parts of the sacrifice are to be eaten, where, when, and by whom. Crucially, it is clear that for the priests, and sometimes the person bringing the offering, eating of the sacrifice is not merely permitted, but required (this will become even more clear in Shmini, the next sedra, which we’ll read after Pesach). The rules of priestly consumption are not arbitrary, an artefact of the fact that priests need to eat; they’re there because food consumption in the context of divine worship is a ritual act.

Within this general context, I want to highlight two interesting things. First, there’s the well-known prohibition against eating blood. This needs little explanation. Blood is life, as we’re told in many places in the Bible, and there’s something ugly or indecent about consuming life itself. At the same time, the presence of blood where it shouldn’t be, outside the body, is a symbol or reminder of death. The priest is enjoined to dash the blood of certain animal offerings against the altar, perhaps reminding us that God has given the world death as well as life; that death is a part of life; and, indeed, that some things must die so that we can eat, and continue to live.

Second, the regular grain offerings, the *minchah* sacrifices, are to be offered to God and a token portion is to be burned on the altar; the remainder is to be eaten by the priests in the form of *matzot*—unleavened bread. Last week's parashah explained (Vayikra 2:11) that leaven and honey cannot be burned on the altar. Leavened bread is included in certain aspects of Temple worship, particularly the *zevach shlamim*—offerings of thanksgiving, where an animal sacrifice is followed by a feast of meat with wine and bread, both leavened and unleavened. When grain or bread itself is the offering, part of it must be burnt on the altar, and the remainder eaten in unleavened form. Why? If you check the internet, leaven is thought to be symbolic of sin and moral corruption, because of the physical corruption associated with leavening and fermentation. But I think the moral layer is secondary, and probably more important in Christianity; at the deepest level, the physical nature of leavening offers sufficient answer. Leavening is the process by which microorganisms like yeast or bacteria break down carbohydrates, converting sugar into alcohol, acids, and gases (specifically carbon dioxide). As such, it is similar to what happens to the body during its decomposition after death. In this, the Bible's fixation on leaven is of a piece with its fixation on blood.

Notably, while during most of the year only the kohanim must avoid leavened breads, at Pesach we are all forbidden from consuming leaven. For one week, we all become kohanim. Perhaps in the spring, particularly for a farming society, the need to hold back the forces of death is so overwhelming it can't be left to the kohanim alone. Ensuring that the forces of life prevail during the coming year requires the participation of all of us.

Shabbat shalom and chag sameach.