

**D'var Torah**  
**Eric J. Ellman**

*Parashah Pinchas*

Numbers 28:16 - 30:1

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Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Gut Shabbos. As always, it is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence. You are in luck today. In Pirkei Avot (2:7) it says that one who hears divrei Torah, words of Torah, will acquire for themselves life in the world to come. So my friends, when I am done with my words of Torah in about an hour from now, you too will be blessed with eternal life. It will be worth the wait.

In this week's parashah it's Passover in July and it's Rosh Hashanah in July. That's pretty cool. We also have a lot of lambs, a lot of rams, a lot of goats, and, of course, we have a whole lot of bull. At other stages of the Torah's triennial cycle, there are easier parts of Pinchas to deal with in a d'var Torah. It would be easier to discuss, for example, how the second census was more of a land grant, as I did the last time I tackled Pinchas in a d'var Torah, but that would be so 5772. In a different year I could talk about how progressive the Torah was when it made financial arrangements for the five daughters of Tzlaph'chad. There are other passages in other years about the genius of organizational management and transition.

The parashah in this cycle is part shopping list for a zookeeper (find all these animals) and part recipe for the holiest and most daring of top chefs (how to sacrifice these animals). Anthony Bourdain would love this one for sure. So how to I make a d'var Torah out of a whole lot of bull? I struggled at first and then I found my way. This parashah is about the power of ritual and sacrifice and how they bring us closer to God and to ourselves.

Ritual is a kind of a sacrifice. The word *korbanot* is usually translated as sacrifices or offerings, but that is not precisely so. *Korbanot* comes from the root kuf, resh, bet, which means to draw near. *Korbanot* brings us nearer to God. This parashah discusses burnt offerings and a lot of them. Here the Torah calls a burnt offering an olah which comes from the root ayin, lamed, hey. It is the same root as aliyah. The root means ascension, perhaps because the smoke ascends in an olah and people ascend in an

aliyah. When one is given an Aliyah, they rise up to the bimah, and of course, *L'ah'sot Aliyah*, to make Aliyah, means moving to Israel. In this parshah a sacrifice brings us closer to God, but let's look more closely.

The sacrifices we make between man and God bring us closer to God. So too are those sacrifices between people. We also make sacrifices for our friends, our family, and our congregation. There are things we do outside the course of our regular days to go out of our way to help people because it brings us closer to them. We go to shiva houses of people we do not know because they are one of us and we cannot stand the idea of them being alone. That is a sacrifice, and also a mitzvah. We really do not need anything else to do at the end of the day, but we meet with a friend who needs a shoulder to cry on. We volunteer for those in need. We do not need one more soccer practice to drive to at the end of the day, but we do it. My father, God bless him, posted for every single soccer game and practice, whether it was blazing hot, freezing cold, or pouring rain. My mother, God bless her, found ways to educate me even though I resisted education at every turn.

Our ancient sacrifices are our modern rituals. Lord Rabbi Jonathan Saks wrote that "rituals are how civilizations preserve their memory." On Passover, which is mentioned in this week's Torah portion, we are commanded to tell our children on that day saying, "it is that for which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." At its very core, Pesach, a very ritualistic holiday and full of sacrifices, is about preserving memory for the sake of the continuity of our people.

We hang a mezuzah on the doorposts of our homes to preserve memory. We walk through many doors in our lives. Some rooms we leave and some rooms we enter. But no matter what door we walk through, even a revolving door or a trap door, whether we are walking away from something or to something, the mezuzah is always there. God is always there. We as a people are always there. With ritual, *am Yisrael chai*. It is these rituals that preserve our memory in good times and bad, and at home and along the way.

What's so amazing about the mezuzah is that the words inside are so simple, so important, and so timeless. What's inside is all about learning. We teach our children, from one generation to the next, all day long from lying down to rising up. Learning is at the core of our tradition. For the people of the book, learning is the ultimate ritual.

One of our most important rituals is Shabbat. Israeli writer and secular Zionist, Ahad Ha'am, said that "more than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews."

Ritual is important at all times, but perhaps especially in the times when we call to God from narrow places. With Anatevka in turmoil, Tevye sang about tradition, a close cousin of ritual. Memory is a close cousin of ritual too. Elie Wiesel, who wrestled with God in the death camps, said that “without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future.”

Yet ritual for sake of ritual is not enough. The exacting detail of the sacrifices in this Torah portion are likely because God wanted to make sure we got it right. Practice makes perfect. Turning again to Rabbi Saks, he said that “ritual develops habits that can lift us to greatness.” He wrote of the “deep practice” developed by concert pianists and professional athletes. He noted that constant practice, whether chess (we’ll call it khess) or chesed,

creates new neural pathways. It makes certain forms of behaviour instinctive. It reconfigures our character so that we are no longer the people we once were. We have, engraved into our instincts the way certain strokes are engraved in the minds of tennis champions, specific responses to circumstance. Prayer engenders gratitude. Daily charitable giving makes us generous...Ritual changes the world by changing us.

Science agrees. There are all manner of studies that have been released in recent years showing that greater emotional rewards from helping others. Devotion away from the self, to others and to God, as it turns out, is scientifically proven to be good for you.

Rituals allow us an opportunity to take a break from the world around us and to focus on bigger things. The Lubavitcher Rebbe looked in this parshah to the use of the term *moed*, appointed time, which is a phrase generally reserved for the festivals and other occasionally occurring observances. The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that the use of this term means that the Torah is urging us to transcend, to experience a sense of specialty and occasion during but out of the “regular” rhythms of life.

This portion of the Torah is the mostly widely read in the calendar. It is the reading for Rosh Chodesh, the new moon; it is read on Pesach and Yom Kippur, on the first two days of Sukkot and the during its hol ha’moed, the intermediate days. We also read it on Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. To me, the frequency of the reading of these passages so often during the year are to remind us how important our rituals are in our daily lives and during the yearly cycle. We need them in our daily lives so we can rise above them. To rise up, olah, towards a higher purpose.

When I started writing this d'var Torah, it was about perfection. How could we demand perfection in our sacrificial animals when we ourselves stand before God with our own blemishes? This is an intriguing concept which I could not reconcile in time for the second hour of my d'var Torah so I will leave that for another day. Yet, I want to make a point on perfection.

We are not perfect, but we strive to be. We may never get to perfection but we should never stop trying. Our hazzan stands before us on the High Holidays as the *shaliach tzibbur* and proclaims, "hineni", here I am, of little merit. He asks that the community not be judged on his or her account, merely that we be held accountable for the fact that we are present. Here we are. Showing up with the right intention can be enough.

The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master is insistent. That is a very demanding passage from Pirkei Avot (2:21), but we also know that it is not for us to finish the work, but nor we are not permitted to stand aside from it. We may never be perfect and our rituals may never be pure, but that should not stop us from trying.

Our ancient rituals bind us still today and we do the best we can and strive to do better. We stand before God on Yom Kippur and we confess how we missed the mark. We beseech God to *La-b'rit habbeir v'al teifen la-yeitzer*, to recall Your covenant, but not our imperfections. In ancient times, we sacrificed animals. Today, we sacrifice ourselves and offer up our rituals.

In failure and in success, and in the narrow places and wide open spaces there should always be ritual. No matter what door we walk out of or in too, the mezuzah is always there, pointing us out or bringing us in. Elizabeth Gilbert, famous for her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, wrote

This is what rituals are for. We do spiritual ceremonies as human beings in order to create a safe resting place for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down. We all need such places of ritual safekeeping.

It is the deep practice of rituals that helps us to achieve the perfection to which we should aspire. We may never be kheses champions, but we could be chesed champions.

I will conclude, if I may be so bold, to offer a blessing to you and a hope that you will bless me in return. May the intention of our rituals be strong and may we use them to teach our children when they lie down, when they rise up, and at every moment in between.

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom Aleichem.