D’Var Vayikra

Sacrifices. Sacrifices. Grandparents who can no longer hug their grandchildren. They must self-isolate. How do they maintain the bond? The work from home single parent who is challenged by the need to work yet care for her children full time. The employee whose only support system was his co-workers and has suddenly lost his job. What is he to do now? The Jewish response to death is communal. What kind of support can a virtual community offer? The recovering addict who depended on his weekly meetings with fellow recovering addicts for the strength to stay sober. How is he to cope? As a society, how do we support him?

Many children are suffering because of the social isolation. They miss their school friendships. With schools closed. Recreation centres closed. Classes cancelled. How do families adjust to these changes? How do we create a peaceful home amidst the chaos? Will Coronavirus intimacy lead to a baby boom? Or to a divorce tsunami?

Relationships are being tested. Some families are thriving; using this time to get to know each other better. Others are crumbling under the pressure of being stuck at home. On the bright side, there are toddlers out there who are absolutely thrilled that they get to spend all day, every day, with their two most favourite people in the whole wide world!

There's a difference between not leaving the house for days on end because you don't want to, and not leaving the house because you can't. This is the situation millions (possibly billions) around the world have found themselves in because of government imposed restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Unfortunately, a lock down can put a real strain on a relationship. China, which is slowly emerging its lengthy lockdown, is now experiencing a sudden spike in divorce rates. Experts say coronavirus is to blame.

Israel is experiencing a spike in domestic violence complaints. Times of Israel reports that “Amid pandemic lockdown and mass unemployment, facilities for women are nearly full. Hotlines report uptick in reports of abuse. Shelters for victims of domestic violence in Israel are nearly at full capacity amid the coronavirus outbreak, prompting the Welfare Ministry to pledge to open new facilities. The backlog is caused by both a rise in complaints of violence and the fact that women who planned to leave the shelters have remained due to the virus.”

Close quarters can put stress on relationships. As one writer said: Cabin fever may not be viral, but it *is* real: if we don’t take proactive steps to keep our relationships healthy, they could buckle under the pressure. Erika Boissiere a licensed marriage and family therapist says that she has been seeing an increase in couple counselling since the start of the virus. She advises that we carve out time alone, create routines ( plan meals together, schedule exercise times, devote specific hours to work or attack a DIY project, focus on the short-term and develop plans together, and remember that no one is perfect. And especially,

**“Practice Kindness In The Face Of Fear**

With COVID-19 spreading across the nation, many of us are scared right now, and rightfully so. Yet yelling or snapping at your partner will not only intensify the crisis in the short-term, it will erode your relationship in the long term.

This is a time for pulling together and drawing on the unique strengths of your relationship. Count your blessings and practice gratitude. Tell jokes, laugh when you can. Weather this storm together, and above all, be kind to each other.”

I am quite proud of the Jewish community in Ottawa. Because that’s what we have been practicing – **kindness**.

Jewish Ottawa Helps has over 800 volunteers offering to help those who need it. Bessy Mendelsohn wrote, “I cannot even thank enough the amazing volunteers calling the tenants in my building. They are angels sent from heaven. Covid-19 has brought out so much love and kindness in our community. Really blown away.”

It really is wonderful to see all the relationships that are developing as a result of this crisis. Many people are helping strangers. Sharing what they have with those in need. The elderly man who lives alone is suddenly getting calls enquiring after his wellbeing. Neighbours are looking after each other. Many schools and organizations are using Zoom to maintain relationships.

So, you are probably thinking. “Why is Roslyn discussing relationships when this parsha is all about sacrifices?” The book of Vayikra is an instruction booklet for priests to know how to perform sacrifices. I, personally, have no interest in learning about how to sacrifice animals, but Rabbi Shoshana Gelfand wrote a D’Var on this parsha that I find inspiring. And I would like to share her words with you:

 “ Although Genesis is usually thought of as the biblical book focusing on relationships, it is actually Vayikra that is the Bible’s How To book for creating and maintaining relationships between people and God.

Vayikra opens with, “And God called to Moses and God spoke to him out of the tent of meeting, saying…” God calls Moses before speaking to him. In the Torah scroll, the first four letters of the word calling (vav, yod, kof, resh) are written normally, but the final letter ( a silent aleph) shows a certain peculiarity. It is written in a smaller font, clearly half the size of the letters surrounding it. Our tradition teaches that nothing in the Torah is superfluous, so there must be meaning in this anomaly. One explanation is that God is modeling good communication skills. In order to truly communicate with another being, whether human or God, we must contract ourselves, and make room for the other person. By first calling to Moses, and then speaking, God creates a situation whereby God’s presence is contracted, thereby making room for Moses in the conversation.

The first word in the book sets the stage for an intimate relationship between God and Moses and reveals to us that the content of this book is about relationships. This book is about relationships, and law, sacrifices, and priests, are merely the means by which we might achieve the desired intimacy of the relationship. The word for sacrifice, korban, comes from the root meaning ‘to draw near.” A sacrifice, therefore, is the means by which we draw near to God, and God draws near and is drawn near to us.

This closeness is further emphasized by the name that the Torah uses to refer to God in this parsha. With only one exception, the word used for God is the four-letter name, usually pronounced Adonai, and NOT Elohim, the more general and generic name for God. Tradition connects the personal name of God with the attribute of rachamim, usually translated as “mercy” but actually deriving from the Hebrew root rechem meaning “womb.” There is no closer human relationship than that of a fetus growing in the mother’s womb. Two separate souls sharing the same physical body.

Parashat Vayikra not only discusses in general how to draw near to God through sacrifice, but also specifies different types of intimacy through the archetypes of various sacrifices.

For example, the portion begins with a discussion of the olah, burnt offering. In this type of sacrifice, the entire animal is placed on the altar to be burnt. The word olah literally means “to go up, “ and as the fire consumes the offering and the smoke ascends to heaven, the desire of the offerer to ascend to heaven and unite with God is thus expressed. Unlike many of the other sacrifices, the word nefesh is used. While adam is often translated as “man” it comes from the word for “earth,” Adamah, from which the first human being was created. The word adam actually refers to the first human creation, which contains both male and female characteristics.

This typology of closeness is identified with intimacy to such an extent that the two beings involved – God and the offerer – become as close as is cosmically possible. The olah is a model of the Divine embrace, becoming passionately lost in one’s relationship with God, blurring the boundaries between the self and the other. While the olah may bring momentary satisfaction, you cannot maintain this kind of intimacy continually.

Therefore, there are other types of sacrifices that represent other ways of maintaining closeness. The zevach shelamim (peace offering) is a type of sacrifice that is only partially burnt on the altar. The root of the word shelamim is the same root as for the word shalom. This root’s meaning conveys a sense of completeness. The root has also come to refer to peace, for peace is indeed a sense of total completeness.

Compared with the olah, what is striking about the shelamim is that the description of it does not use the word adam (the primordial male/female) for the person offering it. On the contrary, the text goes out of its way to specify that the shelamim offering itself can be either a male or female animal. The goal with the shelamim is thus not to lose one’s own sense of self, but rather to maintain distinctions (like male and female), while being able to coexist in peace with those who are different.

The shelamim is only partially sacrificed to God on the altar. Another portion is given to the priests, while the remainder is eaten by the offerer, along with relatives and guests, at a meal following the sacrifice. The shelamim thus represents the closeness expressed through sharing. Each individual maintains a sense of self. Each person contributes the uniqueness of his or her soul, so that collectively, a sense of completeness is achieved. The zevach shelamim, therefore, is the type of sacrifice used to symbolize family unity.

A sacrifice cannot simply be viewed as the offering of an animal. The meaning runs far deeper. Whether we are discussing the olah, the all-consuming passion that allows two entities to draw together and ascend upward as one, or we are focussing on the zevah shelamim, the familial love expressed through sharing of the self to create a collective whole, the purpose of Vayikra is not to overwhelm us with rules of how to offer the sacrifices properly; rather, the intention is to emphasize the importance of relationships. The sacrifice itself is merely a means to an end. In this book, the personal “womblike” God teaches us about closeness and intimacy. Being close to God and other human beings is the true message of Vayikra. ”

It is also in this book, Vayikra, that we find the commands to love your neighbour ( Leviticus 19:18 ) and love the stranger ( Leviticus 19:33 ) The sacrifices that express our love and awe of God lead to love of our family, love of our neighbour, and love of the stranger.

So yes, we are making sacrifices during this Covid-19 pandemic. And yes, we are faced with many challenges, some painful. But as Rabbi Scher recently said, “Through this corona crisis, a more resilient and empathic community has been birthed.”

Shabbat Shalom