



5785 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Reuven Schreier Parashat Vayikra / פרשת ויקרא

Slaying the Lion on a Winter's Day

As we begin reading the extensive discussions of the sacrificial order in *Sefer Vayikra*, the collective, inaudible groan from the synagogue pews rings in my ears. *Vayikra's* detailed descriptions of *korbanot* and the *kohanim* seem to bore many a modern Jew. Rav Soloveitchik *tz'l* beautifully bemoaned the Book of *Vayikra's* "lack of *mazel*." Throughout history, the sacrifices have been mocked by their opponents and grossly misunderstood by their proponents.

But the cynicism towards *Vayikra* cuts deeper than initially meets the eye. In a *derasha* delivered in 1955, the Rav noted that all aggressive philosophical and theological attacks on Judaism begin with *Vayikra* and the *Beit HaMikdash* in Jerusalem. The Syrian Greeks "breached the walls" of the *Mikdash*, trying to reformulate Jerusalem into a idyllic Greek metropolis. The early Christians derided the sacrificial service with venom and gleefully rejoiced in Jerusalem's destruction. Many years later, when the Reformed movement sought to replace "antiquated" Jewish practice with a new Judaism, references to Jerusalem and the *korbanot* were naturally expunged from the *siddur*. (If I may add to the beautiful words of the Rav, the fact that our enemies always begin their vicious pursuits with attacks on *Kodshim* and Jerusalem reflects a unique spiritual dimension to *Vayikra*; this uniqueness is an expression the Jewish People's greatness, thereby making it their preferred initial target.)

In a rich divine irony, the obsession with disconnecting the Jewish people from the *korbanot* in Jerusalem only encouraged "more loyalty toward *Torat Kohanim* (aka, *Vayikra*)-more loyalty than toward other books." Uniquely, the *Amoraim* composed tractates of *Gemara* to *Seder Kodshim* (the order of *Mishnayot* that describes the laws of sacrifices), despite the lack of practical halachik application nowadays. *Rashi* and the *Ba'alei HaTosafot* composed commentaries on *Seder Kodshim* that are extensive and brilliant.

The *Gemara Berachot* (18a-b) describes the greatness of *Benayahu ben Yehoyada*, the loyal servant of *David* and *Shlomo*. The verse (*Shmuel* 2, 23:20) describes his prowess: "he struck down the two commanders of Moab and he went down and slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day." The *Gemara* homiletically explains that this verse is a reference to *Benayahu's* great prowess in the oral Torah. He was so great that he was capable of "slaying the lion", a reference to completing the exceedingly difficult *ספרא דבי רב* (halachik midrashic work on *Vayikra*) even on a shortened winter's day.

The Rav homiletically explained that the greatest testament to *Benayahu's* stature was his ability to delve into this unique area of Torah even as the other nations mocked and derided its value. *Benayahu's* path was followed by the great *talmidei chachamim* of our *mesorah* who continued to delve deeply into the waters of *sefer Kodshim* even long after the destruction of Jerusalem. The derision of the outside world increased tenfold, and yet their loyalty to *Vayikra* and their passion for "slaying the lion" of *Sifra d'Bei Rav* only became



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more powerful. They “hoped and waited for the messiah and studied the *Sifra d’Bei Rav*, representing the Jewish faith in the future...”

“And when did they do all of that? On a winter’s day-on a dark, cloudy, rainy day, when Jewish hopes had worn thin and appeared entirely paradoxical, patently absurd, completely unrealistic...when the whole of historical reality mocked and scoffed at...the *Sifra d’Bei Rav*, at the concept of yearning for a land, awaiting a messiah, and hoping for a Temple that people believed could not possibly come...”

As *Klal Yisrael* again traverses a period of cold darkness, our tenacious loyalty to *Kodshim* and our yearning to see and experience the *avodat hakorbanot* in Jerusalem should only increase tenfold. This year, let us enthusiastically immerse ourselves in the waters of *Vayikra* and slay the lion; *yehi ratzon* that *Hashem* respond to our eager devotion with the destruction of our enemies and the speedy restoration of *Yerushalayim*.

