

# Vayikra

## *Prayers, Facts, and Decisions*

**W**hy is it that we need to pray? What is it that we really pray for anyway? We know that praying alone is not enough. Judaism affirms constantly the maxim that G-d helps those who help themselves. We are an activist religion. We do not and cannot sit back and say that G-d is going to solve all our problems. We, in fact, do say that first we must take the initiative. Even in religious matters we say that first if we will only open our hearts up as much as a little pinpoint to do *teshuva*-G-d will open our hearts as wide as a large hall so we can change for the better. We, though, must act first. Why then do we need to pray?

In life we are all confronted with the task of making decisions. We never can know all the facts, but even if we could know all the facts, we have no assurance that we would interpret them correctly. It is always possible to put such a spin on the facts that we know that what we think we have learned from these facts can be exactly the opposite from what we should have learned from them and this can lead us to make the wrong decisions.

We all know that *Pesach* celebrates the exodus from Egypt. The exodus story was well known throughout antiquity and was quoted by many Greek historians. The way these Greek historians tell the exodus story which they got from Egyptian sources, conforms basically to the facts that are given in the *Torah*; however, they put an entirely opposite spin on the story. They say, based on the Egyptian records, that terrible plagues befell Egypt. Because of these plagues, the Egyptians became terribly frightened and they consulted their gods to find out what was the cause of these plagues. The gods told them that these plagues were coming upon Egypt because the land was polluted with foreigners who were disease ridden, leprous, and unclean, and that the only way Egypt could rid herself of these plagues was to expel these uncouth filthy people. This Egypt did.

If we analyze the Greek historians' description of the exodus, we will see that all the basic facts are correct. Egypt was afflicted with plagues and the Egyptians, because of the plagues, did chase out all the foreigners from their land; however, the whole point of the story is completely lost,

from our point of view, on the Egyptians and later Greek historians. We say the plagues were brought upon Egypt because they enslaved the Jewish people, and the plagues only ceased after the Egyptians had freed our people and let us go. The *Torah*, itself, says that the Egyptians became so frightened after the tenth plague, the slaying of the firstborn, that they did drive our people from the land. The whole point of the exodus, according to Judaism, is that G-d can and will intervene in the affairs of man to make sure that justice is done. The Egyptian and Greek historians had all the essential facts right, but they turned the story completely around. They did not say that Egypt was being punished because they had enslaved innocent people and would not let them go. They said that Egypt was punished because they allowed filthy disease ridden foreigners to live in their midst, but once they expelled them, the gods were happy and Egypt was once more secure and free from plagues. The Egyptian and Greek historians missed the point completely.

We must pray, the rabbis tell us, so that we will be able to correctly evaluate the facts we have so that we will be able to arrive at correct decisions. We pray to be given the insight to understand correctly the relationship between the facts we do have so we will be able to make the right decisions. The word for "pray" in Hebrew, "*Heespalet*," means also "to judge oneself; to evaluate." We ask G-d's help because before we can make any decision, we are usually confronted with 50 good reasons for doing the thing that we are called upon to do and we are, at the same time, confronted with 50 good reasons for not doing the thing that we are called upon to do. We need insight and help in order to make the right decisions. It is so easy to make the wrong decisions. It is so easy to confuse cause and effect.

This is illustrated beautifully by what the natives of New Guinea used to do every time a person would get sick. They would take lice and put it on that person until the lice would stay on that person. When the lice would stay on that person, that person would be declared to be cured. It was almost an infallible method of curing a person, just put lice on them. What was their mistake? In New Guinea everybody had lice; however, lice cannot live above a temperature of 98.6 degrees, so when a person got a fever, the lice would leave. However, the people in New Guinea con-

fused cause and effect. They thought that the sickness this person had was because he did not have any lice on him, that if you could put lice back on him, he would get well and, sure enough, so it was. Once the lice were back on that person, he did get well. Of course, what really happened was that once a person's fever broke and went back to normal, the lice would stay on that person. The people of New Guinea had confused cause with effect.

We do the same thing here many times. The cause of many of our problems in America today stem directly from the breakdown of the family. However, we refuse to recognize this. For some reason we feel that all a person needs in order to get married is to fall in love. We do not teach in our schools how to be a good spouse or how to be a good parent. We do not teach techniques that are necessary in order to hold a marriage together or parenting skills which are necessary in order to raise a good family. We do not make people pass tests before they can get married. A person has to pass a test in order to drive an automobile but we do not even require a blood test anymore to get married, much less skill tests. Divorce is made so easy that it is much cheaper to obtain a divorce than to go for counseling. We all know that violence and sadism on television affect people. It has been proved in one study after another, but we have taken no steps to curb them. The one common denominator that we have discovered among all serial killers is their addiction to hard core pornography, yet we have done nothing to stop hard core pornography. If a food product is found to make just one person in 100,000 sick, the product is immediately removed, but if violent TV shows make one person out of 100 criminally violent, nothing is done. We allow no leeway when it comes to chemicals which may in very rare cases induce cancer, but we are very reluctant to ban any type of literature which will poison the minds of young people and cause them to run wild. In America we always seem to twist everything around so that we do not have to put any restraints upon ourselves or our actions. We want to do what we want to do even if it hurts others and causes society great harm, always justifying these rationalizations by either yelling invasion of privacy or violation of the *Constitution*. Why it is not a violation of the *Constitution* when we prevent people from selling tainted products as it is when we prevent them from selling tainted videos. I do not

understand. It is true that all good principles can be twisted around to cover up injustices, child neglect, etc. The large ranchers in Central America claim that it is wrong for the government to use its power of eminent domain to take their estates and divide them among the peasants because that would violate one of the *Ten Commandments* (thou shalt not steal), but it is all right for the government to use its power of eminent domain to build for them airports and fancy resort harbors for their boats.

We need G-d's help in knowing how to apply principles. Free speech is not an absolute value. There are such things as libel laws, and we do not say that when a person prosecutes another for libel that it is censorship. Society has a right to protect itself. True, every good principle can be perverted, including the right of self defense, but so can every libertarian principle be perverted as when fathers abandon their wives and children, claiming that they have to be free.

The holiday of *Pesach* speaks about these types of rationalizations. It urges us through ceremonial acts to relive slavery so that none of us will every claim that slavery is a necessary institution to ensure civilization, as Plato and Aristotle did. It also has us celebrate our exodus from slavery in family units to teach us that we should never confuse family responsibilities with the concept of slavery. Family responsibilities liberate us; they do not enslave us. It is so hard to deal with good principles because they can always be perverted. Free speech again does not mean that I can insult and belittle and humiliate other people in public with impunity. They can sue me and win damages in a court of law. Free speech does not mean that I can yell fire in a crowded theater.

In the *Torah* portion *Vayikra* we learn something very interesting. We learn that if the president or ruler shall sin and do one of all the *mitzvahs* of G-d which should not be done by error.. This is indeed strange. How is it possible that one can do a *mitzvah* and sin? How can we talk about doing one of the *mitzvahs* of G-d which should not be done? I thought the *mitzvahs* were something we should do. The answer, of course, is that even a *mitzvah*, if done with wrong understanding, can lead to great harm. Even a *mitzvah* must be done the correct way. In Judaism we say that evil is really good that has burst its bounds. That's why a person of good character is called a *Baal Midos*, one who can accurately measure the situation

in which he is in and draw the correct conclusions. For this, we need G-d's help and for this we need to pray. G-d, let me make the right decisions so that even when I am trying my best to apply the principles and *mitzvahs* of the *Torah*, I will do it in such a way as not to cause harm to others or bring sin upon myself. It is not easy to correctly judge a situation, and it is not easy to make the right decisions. For this reason, we all must pray. We all need G-d's help. Let us hope and pray that G-d will answer our prayer and grant us the ability to make right decisions.

### *Ethics Demand that We Sacrifice*

**T**he third book of the *Bible*, *Vayikra*, contains the most sublime ethical principles interspersed with many ritual matters. Such ethical principles as you should love your neighbor as yourself, love the stranger, help the orphan and the widow are found right next to the laws of sacrifice. Why should this be so? The *Torah* here is teaching us a very important lesson, that unless a person is willing to sacrifice there can be no ethics. These ritual matters are not just ritual. You cannot help another unless you are willing to sacrifice of your time and your efforts and your money. The ability to sacrifice for somebody else, to deny yourself, is the very basis of ethical life. Passover is quickly approaching. On *Pe-sach* we learn about freedom.

There are two types of freedom, "freedom of" and "freedom from." "Freedom of" speaks about absolute freedom. Freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of religion. It is the type of freedom which asks only that a person be left alone. It is a passive freedom. It does not demand human cooperation. "Freedom from," on the other hand, is a freedom which demands that others help you. Freedom from hunger, freedom from disease, freedom from the cold, etc. Unfortunately, in our day we only seem to be concerned about the "freedom of."

People want to be individuals. They want to be able to do their thing. They do not want to be limited in any way. They feel frustrated if they are. That's why there is so much child abuse now, wife abuse and grandparent abuse. People feel children get in the way. Old people, why don't you just die? This is their philosophy. This is completely wrong. We need other people just to live, just to produce our food and our clothes. We should

start stressing “freedom from” as well as “freedom of.”

In this week’s *Torah* portion, we have the verse “a man when he will sacrifice.” The word for “man” here is “Adam,” singular. It’s true we are all individuals and entitled to freedom, but we cannot live alone. This sentence starts out in the singular, a man, and ends in the plural “you will sacrifice.” Unless we realize that we need others as much as they need us, we will not get anywhere. Unless we realize this, child abuse and grandparent abuse will increase. We have to learn how to sacrifice, how to give people our time and our effort and our attention. Even today, professional people who are supposed to serve people have no time for them. Doctors do not have time for their patients except in a very narrow sense nor do lawyers or even psychiatrists.

I’m reminded of the story about a man who was going to a psychiatrist. One night he had a dream about his mother, but when his mother turned to him, he saw that his mother had the face of his psychiatrist. He woke up and went back to sleep and had the same dream a second time, a third time, and a fourth time. He could not go to sleep. He stayed awake for five hours. All he had for breakfast was a Coke and he ran over to his psychiatrist. He told him about the dream, how his mother had his face that he could not sleep and that all he had for breakfast was a Coke. He asked the psychiatrist to please help him. The psychiatrist looked at him and said, “You mean all you had for breakfast was a Coke?” We have to learn to share our time and money, and pay attention to be ethical.

### *The Little Things Make a Big Difference*

**I**n the *Torah* portion *Vayikra* we learn about sacrifices. We learn how we are to sacrifice. This *Torah* portion begins with the word “*Vayikra*” “and he called.” The word *Vayikra* is spelled with a little *Aleph*. This little *Aleph* has no sound but yet it is vital to understand the meaning of this word because without the *Aleph*, this word means “and it just happened.” With the *Aleph*, it means “and he called.” The small things which make no sound are sometimes the most important things. Whether the world is just a chance occurrence or whether it has meaning and purpose and each of us has a function in it are just concepts within our mind.

We cannot see, touch, or feel this concept, but whether or not we believe in this concept, determines our whole life.

It is the little, unseen, unheralded things that make the big difference. A person who thinks that life is just a chance occurrence feels that life is going round, that it is not worth anything and is much more susceptible to drugs, alcohol, etc., but a person who knows that G-d is counting on him and that what he does is important will try to live a good and a just life and will be happier inside. That little *Aleph* is just a little thing. It does not make a sound, but how important it is!