

My friends, tomorrow is the first Shabbat morning of the Book of Leviticus. I can almost hear the groans: “Oy, sacrifices, skin diseases, discharges...” and yes, those things are in Leviticus. But tonight I want to change your opinion of this book. I’m talking about Leviticus tonight, but the title of this sermon is “Feeling Closer To God.” Who would not want to feel closer to God?

Let’s start with Leviticus itself. There are three things I want you to know that I think will help you think differently about this book. First, some of the Torah’s most sublime principles come from Leviticus. Two of my favorites come from Chapter 19: “You must be holy ones, because I, Adonai your God, am a Holy One,” and the more famous “Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai.” Did you realize that these beautiful verses came from Leviticus?

Second, I want you to understand how Leviticus changed the world. The Israelites were not the first nation to worship through animal sacrifice. Every ancient culture worshipped its gods through sacrifice, sometimes including human sacrifice. But Leviticus changed the world by eliminating the pagan idea that people sacrifice animals in order to feed their gods. In fact,

Leviticus makes clear that the sacrifices were not for God at all. They were for us, and that brings me to the third point I want to make tonight, and to the heart of tonight's sermon.

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *korban*. It comes from the Hebrew word *karov*, meaning close or closeness. Our ancestors did not offer sacrifices to feed God. They did not offer the sacrifices to meet any Divine needs; God might want certain things from us, but God does not *need* anything from us. To quote the "theologian" Archie Bunker, "That's how He got to be God."

So why then did the ancient Israelites offer sacrifices? Let's restate the question using the Hebrew term: Why did they offer *korbanot*? Why did they offer what Everett Fox translates not as a sacrifice but as a "near-offering?" By making this offering, they transferred something from the everyday realm to the realm of the sacred, thus making it, in their minds, a gift for God. When you give someone a gift, does that not make you feel close to the recipient? So the point of the sacrifices was to make the one who brought the sacrifice feel closer to God. That leads us to the two questions that are the heart of this sermon: what

makes you close to God already, and what can you do to feel closer to God?

The first question is food for spiritual thought. Only you can answer that question. I will share with you three of the times I felt closest to God: the births of my children. I would imagine that most of us have had special experiences that made us feel closer to God than usual. The more challenging question is how to feel closer to God every day.

For that question, I will share some answers that work well for me. Your mileage may vary, as the automotive manufacturers say. You may need to tweak what works for me. You might take what works for me and let it lead you to something completely different that works better for you, or maybe what works for me will give you more food for spiritual thought and lead you to some of your own practices. But let us start with this idea from the greatest scholar of Leviticus in the world, Rabbi Dr. Jacob Milgrom, of blessed memory, who wrote “Anthropology has taught us that when a society wishes to express and preserve its basic values, it ensconces them in rituals.”¹ Therefore, it makes

¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), 1.

sense that the first two suggestions I have for you are ritual in nature.

The first one is the easiest thing in the world to do, but unlike most things that require little effort, it has an amazingly powerful effect on me. I have become an inveterate mezuzah kisser. It is very rare for me to walk by a mezuzah without touching the mezuzah and kissing my fingertips. If I miss one, that means I am very distracted. I never knowingly walk by a mezuzah without performing that little ritual. Try it, make it a habit, and see if it does not only make you feel a connection to God Who commanded us to put His words on the doorposts of our houses, but because the mezuzah is uniquely Jewish, it will also deepen your connection to your Judaism. Nothing else I know of is so easy but pays such rich dividends.

The second is almost as easy, and it is just as powerful. It is not necessarily uniquely Jewish, but it is very easy to make it so. Before you eat, even if it is in your mind without moving your lips, thank God for the food you are about to eat. To make it uniquely Jewish, say a Hebrew blessing. Say *ha-motzi*. What if the food you are about to eat is not kosher? Say the blessing anyway. God still deserves to be thanked, and you still want to

feel closer to God. If the cognitive dissonance gets to be too much, think about elevating your level of *kashrut*, but make that blessing before you eat.

You may be aware that *ha-motzi* is specifically for bread, and you may be eating a meal without bread. You may not know the blessings for other foods. Then what? How about this: “*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, source of the food I am about to eat?*” What’s wrong with that? If you can pray in two languages, do you think God can’t understand two languages? Or, if you don’t like that, then say *ha-motzi*. It might not be exactly the right blessing. So what? Do you think God would rather be acknowledged with *ha-motzi* than be ignored completely? And won’t saying *ha-motzi* make you feel more connected to God, more connected with your Judaism, and bring a moment of holiness into your day? And again, if the cognitive dissonance of saying *ha-motzi* when technically you should be saying another blessing gets to be too much, then it’s time to learn a few more blessings.

Very closely related to this suggestion is the practice of daily prayer. Yes, I chose to make my daily prayers the traditional three Jewish daily services. I don’t ask you to go

from not praying every day to saying the full traditional services. But can you find a moment in your day to do the religious equivalent of acknowledging that if you wake up in the morning, that's good? Can you take a moment to say, "I am here, I have challenges in my life but I also have blessings?" If so, then you can say, "I am here, I have challenges in my life but I also have blessings. Thank you, God." Believe me, that simple prayer will grow on you, and yes, you will feel closer to God.

So that makes two suggestions, and all teachers of good preaching say you should always use three examples, so I'll follow that rule. I have a close friend who is a deeply religious and observant Jew, but guess what? Prayer does not work for him. He does not find it moving. He does not really like services, although he goes for things other than the prayers, but prayer is not what connects him to God and his Judaism. Do you know what does? Study. That's what makes his face light up. That is my final suggestion for how to feel closer to God. Study; read something Jewish. One obvious suggestion is the Torah portion of the week. Another might be to read parts of the Hebrew Bible you have not read before, and if you want to do that, I highly recommend the *Jewish Study Bible* by Oxford

Press, because it has the same translation we use at Shaarey Tefilla along with an excellent commentary. Use a commentary if you decide to read Bible, so that the text can come alive for you. Or read something else Jewish. Have you read Alan Dershowitz's outstanding book, *The Case for Israel*, which is fifteen years old but is as important today as when it came out in 2003? How about a tiny book you can read in under an hour, but one that you will read again and again, *The Ten Commandments* by Dennis Prager, or Rabbi Arthur Green's tiny but wonderful *Judaism's Ten Best Ideas: A Guide for Seekers*, or any book whose cover says, "By Rabbi Harold Kushner?" Understand that this is taking a slightly different route to God. These books will first deepen your connection to Judaism, but that will lead you to a greater feeling of closeness to God. And so, my friends, those are my suggestions for you on how to do what our ancestors did through sacrifice, or again, what Fox calls "near offerings." Those ancient rituals helped our ancestors to feel close to God. Every blessing has its curse, and every curse has blessing. We are blessed to live in a much richer society than our ancestors did, but the curse of that blessing is that we have much more to distract us from God than they did. But that curse has its own

blessing. That blessing is that we have far more pathways to draw us closer to God than they did, so all that we have to do is choose one, develop the habit, and you'll soon see that what begins as one kiss to one mezuzah will grow into a deeper and richer connection to your Judaism and your God.