

Vayikra – 5782

Forty years ago, my mother and I became addicted to the books by Jean Auel in the Clan of the Cave Bear series. I cited the time lapse because since that time, the description of life at the interface between the end of the Neanderthals and the dawn of the age of Man has proved many of the details described in those books correct. Science has proved that we have traces of Neanderthal genes in us meaning that there were indeed instances of the co-mingling of the two. What I have found even more fascinating is the view into the inner life of those earliest of men in a world that was entirely beyond their understanding.

I used to have to teach a unit to my Junior students about our Canadian First Nations and, as was my wont, I would try and integrate my social studies classes with art. I would read fables and stories passed down to us from those early peoples that sought to explain the natural world and our place in it. I would ask my students to picture a band of Inuit or Cree or Iroquois sitting around a fire while the winds howled seeking to entertain themselves and find comfort in being together while the wind howled, and the elements lashed their shelter on the outside. I would think back to Jean Auel's characters in a cave seeing the skies light up with lightning or rush against the onslaught of a forest fire which they knew presented danger to their lives.

But try to imagine how hard it must have been for my students to relate to those images and how much harder today with first Walt Disney and then later on Google. It takes a very good imagination to be able to close one's eyes and put oneself in those situations. WE cannot begin to comprehend what life must have been like back then. However, it is necessary for us to be able to do that in order to understand properly what we read about in this

week's Parsha, Vayikra, which is the beginning of the third of the Five Books of Moses. We have left the building and the consecration of the Mishkan or the Tabernacle behind and we are now contemplating the significance of a sacrificial cult which our post-modern mentality finds even harder to understand the necessity of than the sages of the Sanhedrin that sought to replace the sacrificial cult of the First and Second Temples which was lost in 70 C. E.

In order to really come to grips with the significance of this very complex book, we need to realize that the religious imperative, the roots of man's need for religion, began back in that cave. In the Jean Auel books, she explores the inner life of those first humans. It begins with the awareness that we respond to the world differently than the other creatures around us. We have minds and we have language, and we have agency. Yet we wonder how it happens that we are different from the rest of the animal kingdom. Why is our most imponderable of questions.

I am sure I am not the only one who has wondered by what miracle I was lucky enough to have something wonderful happen to me or similarly how lucky or what a miracle it was that I escaped something bad happening to me and not to someone else. Leviticus informs us that we, the Jewish people, were meant to be a community, that we would fulfill our highest objectives and avoid the worst that might befall us, as long as we realized that we were not alone, we were part of a sacred group. It teaches us to be holy because HaShem, our creator, is holy and we are created in his image. The sacrifices are meant to be that which shows our gratitude for that protection and that being favoured above others but also our regrets for having done something bad. It is that idea of love that differentiates us from the Greeks and Romans and Egyptians whose civilizations were begun at

around the same time. They saw the world as the earlier men saw it, shaped by forces that had power over man and good and bad were merely determined by fate. Sacrifices in those cultures were meant to appease those fates. Their sacrificial rites died out when their cultures disappeared from history.

But our sacrifices were replaced after the destruction of the Temple with prayer, study of Torah, and acts of lovingkindness as our way to express remorse or thankfulness. The sages of the Sanhedrin found sources elsewhere in the Tanach, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, to prove that we could continue without animal sacrifices because, from the beginning of Biblical times, those real sacrifices were stand-ins for the sacrifices we ourselves made because we had agency. We have free will and we can make choices which either advance our case before HaShem or are not made with enough person sacrifice to change our behaviour for the better. When we gather on Yom Kippur, we pray that our fate will be sealed for a good year, for life to be good to us and to those around us whom we love.

Our free will gives us agency that is the substitute for the sacrifices as described in Leviticus. We can act to be better; we can intellectualize a world in which we have the ability to take steps to protect ourselves from the vagaries of life and understand when things don't work out the way we had hoped that we don't have to take our bad luck personally. We can appreciate that we can pick ourselves up and regroup. Those early men had no such awareness. The cave bear either did or did not favour you. It was not something you had any control over. We are able to believe that we have a partner in HaShem who we worship and attempt to mould our behaviour in ways that he will find favourable. We understand that because we live in a community, personal sacrifices are required for everyone to survive and

thrive. That is the deal we struck with HaShem through Moshe Rabeinu at Sinai.