

## Vayikra – 5783

Did you know that in 2014, the Jews ranked as the most respected religion group in the United States in a study by the PEW Research Institute? I would never have guessed that to be the case, but I double checked that tidbit in preparation for the writing of this morning's Davar Torah. I have been thinking about that since Sunday of last week when I was driven back to Dart's from the cemetery after the funeral for Joan Pomerantz, may her memory be a blessing to all of us. Why would I have reflected on that fact just at that time? My driver was one of the assistants from the funeral home who was talking about how much he respected our people. What was the one thing that he mentioned more than anything else? He talked about our faith and our customs and how nicely he was always treated by our people. But one thing stood out to him more than everything else and that was our self-discipline. I had to think about that for a while, but I think I understand where that perception arose from.

If you think about it, as we begin Vayikra and we encounter right from the first page the nature of sacrifices and the specificity with which the entire process is described, you can begin to see how self-discipline might have become a hallmark of our people. Vayikra is the book of the Torah that contains the vast majority of the mitzvot and as we read the parshiot onwards from today, we'll encounter all of them. Think about it though. When we are challenged by those who wish to question why we do what we do, like with the maintenance of Kashrut for instance, we are reminded that sometimes, we have to accept on faith why such and such a law is important. A standard response would be because HaShem demands it of us.

Last week, I commented on the maintenance of Shabbat and how we can argue that Shabbat has kept the Jewish people, but the Jewish people have kept Shabbat as well. It is a reciprocal arrangement. I focus on Shabbat again this morning because you can so easily relate to how many things were done to ensure the Shabbat was observed in just such a manner each and every week. Of course, we can argue that it was supposed to be to make the difference between the profane and the holy, to make the difference between all the other days of the week and the Shabbat. But to make the Shabbat just that way each and every week, week in and week out, month after month and year after year, requires a tremendous amount of self-discipline.

Think about Pesach which is now just around the corner and how many different steps are taken each and every year to ensure that Pesach is kept just a specific way and those who don't question the need for all of that "discipline". We read the sacrifices and their various kinds and when one is offered for this, and another is offered for that. Just last Thursday, we observed Rosh Chodesh and we read the selection from Parshat Pinchas in which the sacrifices for each and every one of the holidays is described in great detail and we are required to reach the selection on what to sacrifice on Rosh Chodesh EVERY single month. When we harp at our kids as they are growing up about brushing their teeth and making their beds and sitting up straight at the table and so forth, it is all part of the same songbook. We are trying to TRAIN our kids to act a certain way and behave in a certain way and to discipline themselves in a certain way.

What is the advantage of all that discipline though? Why is it so important to live a life of self-discipline and sometimes self-denial? (Think – oy...I'd love that shrimp there, but I am not supposed to eat it? I know I

should keep kosher at home but what is the point? What will it hurt to have a bit of bread at Pesach? What is so wrong with sneaking out during the services for the High Holy Days and going to watch the Tepees practice for the start of the season? Who cares if I have my tea with milk at the table after a fantastic steak dinner? I am sure you can write that script for me as well from here.

I would contend that it is self-discipline that has forced the Jewish people to rise anew from the ashes after each and every period in History when the outside world sought to annihilate us. I would contend that it was self-discipline that made my grandparents and their friends, the earliest settlers of our community, to work all day and half the night and still find time to raise funds and make plans to build this gorgeous sanctuary we now call our own. It was self-discipline that enabled the Jews who survived the crucible of the Holocaust to pick up the pieces of their lives and start anew, no matter where they found themselves. It was most often the lack of that same self-confidence that pushed so many to go astray and find themselves without any roots and any place to hang their hats and call it home.

I have often grappled with the reasons for beginning Torah study amongst the young with the opening verses of Vayikra. Why beginning with a five-year-old to talk about sacrifices and kashrut and purity in marriage and all the other topics that we will look at over these next weeks as we read from Vayikra? I think it is for the same reason that we are supposed to try and show our children how to behave and how to show respect and that there is a time and place for everything. Gaining self-respect has tremendous value no more so than in our world today. The sad part is that so many of younger members have grown up part of the me-too movement who have lost the understanding of and the ability to deny themselves anything. When we

deny ourselves, we show humility, and we show that we understand our place in the cosmos. Nothing is more important than developing a thick skin and being more than a little stiff-necked. HaShem mocked his people after the Golden Calf because he suggested we were a stiff-necked people. But he never said that was a bad thing. Only gave us guidance on how to be stiff-necked and still respect justice and piety and equality and all the other values that we stand for as a people. We can only hope that those same values will show themselves VERY soon as we gaze on our brethren in Israel and hope and pray for peace in Jerusalem. Shabbat shalom.