

Rabbi David Ingber's Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon

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There's something about me, and I think I'm not alone in this, that resists opening the book of Vayikra. After the narrative sweep of Genesis, and the drama and liberation of Exodus, we arrive here, within the world of korbanot, of offerings, sacrificial offerings, blood, fire, ash. Whenever we read it, it feels like such a departure from Shmos and from Brashith, from Exodus and from Genesis.

And it is. And I know that what appears distant and technical and almost alien to those narratives is just an honest sense that many of us have that we don't wake up in the morning yearning to learn about how to dismember a bull. And yet, I also know that the resistance to korbanot and to that whole universe is not only about that ancient ritual, but about something else, something a little bit more real.

Because at the heart of it, there's something about intimacy that is being discussed. Something about intimacy. Vayikra is not only about sacrifice, it's about this closeness.

And the very word that is used for sacrifices in our tradition, korban, is an intimation of that intimacy. Korban, from the word kirva, l'karev, karov, to come close, to draw near, ki karov ilakha davar, it's close to you. So I wonder to myself, what is it, if I'm resisting Vayikra, what is it in me that's also resisting intimacy? What is it in me that is at a distance from my life? What part of myself am I reluctant to bring close to God and to others, and maybe even to myself? We live in a time that has perfected distance.

We can do things from a distance that we could never have imagined doing, we can see things from a distance that we could never have imagined seeing from a distance. We know how to curate ourselves, we know how to present ourselves, that is the version of who we are that feels most acceptable and polished and safe. Even our vulnerability can become a kind of performance.

Is that familiar to anybody? Vulnerability as performance? But real closeness, kirva, is costly. It asks something of us, something is being given, something is being offered. It asks us to bring forward not just what is whole and beautiful, but like the Leonard Cohen poem I quoted earlier, to bring our not-so-perfect offerings, our broken and conflicted and unfinished business, our impatience, our envy, the grief that has no words, and the love that we are afraid won't be returned.

The question that Vayikra asks me and you and all of us every year, quietly but insistently, is this, what are you willing to bring near? What are you willing to bring near? Vayikra, the book, begins with a very famous, a famous anomaly in the text. The word Vayikra, which means to call, the word that gives the book its name, has a small aleph at the end of it, an aleph ze'era, a little teeny aleph that could. This little aleph is almost a whisper of a font.

It's there but not there. Mati, v'lo mati, perceptible but imperceptible. That little aleph there, it's an intimation of intimacy.

Vayikra starts with this little aleph that is gentle and doesn't overwhelm. Many, many of the Hasidic books say that the aleph here represents an attenuation of the light of the first light, the first oar that ever was. It's now being packaged so that Moshe can hear it.

It's a whispered volume reduction, inviting Moshe to come close, like, Moshe, Moshe. After the thunder of Sinai, something much more subdued, a voice that can only be heard if we're willing to lean in. And the Midrash suggests that this call wasn't just to Moshe, the leader, but to Moshe, the human being, the one who could enter the tent of meeting, not because he was perfect, but because he was willing.

Moshe hears the call not as a leader, but as the human being. I want to hang out there for a minute. Moshe as human, as fallible, as vulnerable, as permeable.

Just before this call, what happens in the Torah? Last week's Torah portion, the end of the book of Exodus, ends with this very profoundly shocking sentence. We're told that Moshe couldn't enter into the tent. ולא יכול משה לבוא אל עול מועד.

He can't get in. This intimacy call, this whispered, psht, come in. It arrives not to a perfect leader, but a leader who is deeply vulnerable, deeply excluded, who stands on the outside of this remarkable achievement and feels alienated.

After Sinai, after the plagues, after leading the people out of Egypt, after going up in the cloud, Moshe finds himself positioned at the edge, unable to go in. And it's almost unbearable when the book of Exodus ends. It's like you're thinking, Moshe, don't be so shy.

You've been inside of clouds before. It's not your first rodeo. He builds the Mishkan.

He facilitates it. He's the one who brings the people into a relationship with God and now he's left outside. There's a kind of spiritual disorientation for him.

I'm not knowing. I did everything right. So why now? Why can't I enter? I did what you asked me to do.

Maybe he's waiting. Maybe he's afraid. Maybe he doesn't know if he's worthy.

Maybe the intimacy itself is overwhelming to him. And then you can hear it now, right? Vayikra, Moshe. You can hear this divine, gentle tug saying, Moshe, come in.

It's okay. Come on in. We have room for you.

No one's excluding you. Come in. God calls to him.

Not from the mountain, but from inside of him. He says, Moshe, you don't have to force your way into this closeness. You don't have to earn your way in either.

You are invited just to step in. And once you hear that call, once you realize that you are wanted on the inside, then a second question, a second order of questions emerges. Now that you are here, now that you've arrived, now that you've worked through the reticence, now that you've come close, what do you bring? That's when all the korbanot come.

All the offerings. And here there's another verse in the parasha this week that's remarkable. The Torah doesn't say, when you come in, when a person brings an offering, it says, Adam ki yakriv mikhem korban Adonai.

When a human being brings from you an offering. It's a very strange locution. Adam ki yakriv mikhem.

From you, from amongst you. Mikhem. The rabbis pick up on this strange word, mikhem.

From you. Don't bring from the animal. The offering is you.

Mikhem. From within you. The animal is just the external form.

What part of yourself are you ready to bring forward? Chazal. Adam ki yakriv mikhem. Once you're on the inside.

Once you've already been invited in. Once you've heard the call, whispered, gentle. Now what do you bring? Bring you.

And bring all of you. I was scrolling. People here scroll ever? Any scrolls? Not just this scroll.

Anybody ever scroll? I want to make sure that I'm not alone here. I'm bringing my vulnerable parts here. I sometimes scroll.

It's true. I scroll. You scroll.

We all scroll. And so I was scrolling. And I came across a clip from a famous Israeli soccer player named Eyal Berkowitz.

Eyal Berkowitz. I didn't grow up in Israel, so I didn't know who he was. But I was taken, because he was being interviewed by a very famous, a very famous persona in Israel named Ronit Kuban.

He's like the most famous interviewer in Israel. And Ronit Kuban was in this interview with Eyal Berkowitz. And Eyal Berkowitz admitted something that most of us would never say out loud.

I couldn't believe it. He said that when he was a younger player and someone else took his position, he would secretly root for the player that had replaced him to fail so that he could get back into the game. So competitive.

So competitive. And Kuban, Ronit Kuban was stunned by that admission. He looked at him and said, are you admitting that to me on live TV? That level of jealousy, that level of competitiveness, that is what you're going to be telling the viewers? And so Berkowitz turned it around on him.

He looked at him and he said, would you want someone else to take your place interviewing me? And Kuban said, of course not. I'm dying to get this interview. And Berkowitz said to him exactly.

And then Kuban said this, yes, but you admitted it. Something disarming at that moment, right? Berkowitz isn't proud of it. He's not hiding it, though.

He's not throwing it under the bus. He's not saying, oh, that's not me. He's bringing it forward.

He's bringing it near. He's owning it. He's saying out loud, I have this part.

I'm not flaunting it. I'm not hiding it. That's Kuban.

He's not his polished self. He's not his curated self. He's not his honest self, fully.

He is his honest self. It's his jealous self and his afraid self. And the part of him that says, I don't want to be replaced.

I want to matter. That's Adam Ki Akriv Mikem, from you. Bring that to me.

Bring your own soul. Only you. Your offering that no one else can bring, that is unique to you.

B-Y-O-S. Bring your own soul. The Sifat El Mesir, the Hasidic Rebbe, the Sifat El Meir teaches that that external act of offering is only meaningful insofar as it reflects an inner movement of the soul.

Just bringing something. If you're not bringing yourself near, you can act as if, and you're showing up, and it's not really who you are. That inner movement of the soul is vital.

And without that, it's just a ritual. But when that's there, it's an encounter. And so I wanted to teach you one little minhag, a custom that many of you might know.

For those who don't know, I'm teaching you. For those who do, I'm reminding you that there's an almost counterintuitive tradition in Judaism. That when children begin to learn Torah, for the very first time, we don't start them where? At B'reishith.

They don't learn, in traditional curricula, they don't learn B'reishith first. They don't learn Shemot and Exodus second. They don't learn... They don't start with creation and with Noah and with Avram and Joseph.

Where do children start learning in traditional pedagogy? Vayikra. Vayikra. And you're thinking, that's crazy.

Why would you start with Vayikra, with Korbanot, with all of these things? The rabbis ask, why would you begin a child's spiritual education with Vayikra, the most arcane and least accessible part of the Torah? And there's a deceptively simple answer that the rabbis offer. יְבוּ תְהוֹרִים לְתַאֲסְקוּ בְּתִהְרֹת Let the pure come and engage with matters of purity. Let this purity meet this purity.

What purity? I know this children's purity, but what's the other purity? Something much deeper is happening here. It's not only about purity, it's about proximity. We shouldn't hear it as, let this right purity meet this purity.

We should meet this one who knows what it is to ask for what they need and want. Let this honesty meet this honesty. Let this proximity meet this proximity.

Let this one who's not afraid to say, Me too. אדם כי אקריב מיכם The children represent that holy, untarnished and unvarnished, imperfect offering that is so perfect. Children want intimacy so deeply and they want to be close so badly.

Let the ones who know what it is to ask to be close come and show us how to continue to ask to be close. That's the core of Vayikra. It's not a detour, it is the essence of the Torah.

We don't begin by telling the children the stories about God. We begin by inviting them into a sense of God's closeness. Before they can analyze, before they can debate, before they can even understand it, they can feel what it means to come close and they can teach us and remind us too.

And maybe that's the quiet radicalism of this moment. We think we have to understand everything before we can enter. We think we have to resolve our doubts and clean up our contradictions.

We need to make sense of the whole system. But the Torah begins somewhere else. It says, not with your comprehension, with your presence, with simple and vulnerable acts of coming near.

So I have news. We don't have a temple anymore. But we're not exempt from this question.

If anything, this has become even more urgent. Because now there's no script and no prescribed ritual to hide behind. The altar is our lives.

The fire is our attention. And the offering is whatever we are brave enough to bring into the light. And sometimes it's gratitude.

Sometimes it's my broken heart. Sometimes it's a simple, terrifying act of being honest with someone that you love, or maybe with yourself, with God. Sometimes the offering is restraint.

Sometimes it's not being willing to be drawn into an acrimonious conversation. That's an offering. And sometimes it means that when something is happening in the public eye, you whisper to your friends and you say, shh, come here.

Let's talk. Not over here in the posturing of Facebook and Instagram. Not over here in the public pronouncements.

But just me and you, one heart to another. Let's talk. Where there are no cameras and no one's recording it, to amplify and algorithmically challenge each and every one of us to see one another as not mi ken, not one of mine.

Adam ki akriv mi ken. Don't turn away, but be close, and draw near. This moment is that moment where Vayikra whispers something that is countercultural and almost radical to all of us.

Closeness is still possible. But the kind of closeness that is possible is created only through a willingness to come near and to go inside, to show up with what's real, to risk presence and answering the call. In Vayikra, God is still calling us each and every day, as the Katska Rebbe reminded us.

There's a call that goes out every day and says, Can you hear me calling you and whispering you in? That is the power of mi ken. The whisper and the offering. B-Y-O-S.

Bring your own soul. With that subtle courage that invites us to bring more of ourselves forward and to place it gently, consistently, on the altar of the present moment. May God give us the strength to bring our imperfect offerings, to hear the whispers that the Divine and others are using to invite us to come close.

And may we live to see a world with more connection, more intimacy, and more honesty. Amen. Please rise, everybody, for the Aleinu.

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