

Parashat Vayikra: New traditions – old messages

This week we begin reading the third book of the Torah. In Vayikra we are told about the laws of the “korbanot”, animal sacrifices that the People of Israel performed in honor of God in the dessert. When we read this Parasha it is often difficult for us to understand it from a modern perspective. Thinking of people sacrificing animals to communicate with God is far from our current practice.

Many scholars have tried to find the rational for this old practice. Rabbi Mordechai Edery in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah, brings Maimonides’ view in the Guide for the Perplexed (Book III: 32) that teaches it would be impossible for human beings to move suddenly from one extreme to another and suddenly abandon all the old customs. At the time of the Exodus it was an accepted tradition to offer animals at pagan temples. God didn’t ask our ancestors the complete rejection of these rituals because at that time in the development of the Israelite tradition it would have been something impossible to accept. That is why God permitted to maintain this ritual, but instead of worshiping pagan gods, he asked to be transferred to his name. And that is also the reason why we built for him an altar, a Sanctuary and a Temple.

I think we can extrapolate Maimonides’ view and learn an important message for us today. There are many customs and traditions that modernity offers to us. Judaism does not ask to avoid them completely or to eradicate them from our lives. What our tradition asks is to re-direct them in order to serve God but still living and enjoying our times. As in any generation, being a Jew is a permanent challenge of receiving the tradition, “resignificating” new practices with its old and valuable messages, and putting it in practice through our daily deeds.

Shabbat Shalom