



VAYIKRA

Prepared by: Jonathan Eig
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If you're on Facebook, you're probably a fan of the Facebook birthday. In the old days, a birthday might bring three or four Hallmark cards and a couple of phone calls (Thanks, Mom!). But with Facebook, dozens, even hundreds of birthday wishes pour in. Is this an example of the new and relatively impersonal improving upon the older, more intimate approach?

In this week's Torah portion, Vayikra, we learn the rules governing sacrifices, including what can be offered (animals, birds, grain) and how they should be presented. Many ancient societies believed that God needed food for sustenance. But the Torah tells us God wants sacrifices not for sustenance but out of longing for devotion. The sacrifice seems primitive by modern standards, but it provided a powerful visceral connection for worshippers. It made God feel less abstract.

The sacrifice, in other words, wasn't for God; it was for us to feel closer to God. That desire for closeness helps explain why we step backward and forward or bow when we pray. It helps explain why we offer donations to charity in accompaniment to prayers. It helps explain why we fast or keep the Sabbath by abstaining from work.

Praying without blood, smoke, and fire is more civilized. Sending birthday wishes on Facebook is quicker and often more fun than mailing a card. But it's worth thinking about what's lost in the modernization and what, if anything, we can do to preserve those elements we don't want to lose.

At your Shabbat dinner table this week, where of course you will dine without checking Facebook or otherwise using your phone, try these questions:

1. Can you think of any religious rituals that make the experience of prayer seem more visceral?
2. Can you think of religions other than your own that have rituals you would like to see in your own place of worship?
3. In Hebrew, the word "offering" is *korban*, which means "to bring close" or "to come close." Why does giving someone a gift or giving a sacrifice to God make someone feel closer?