

Dear Chavraya,

Headlines screeching from the paper, leaping from the screen, jolting us awake before the first sip of coffee: “CANDIDATES APOLOGIZE FOR ACRIMONY;” “JUSTICES TO ATONE FOR JUDGEMENT LAPSE;” “BREACH OF TRUST ACKNOWLEDGED BY LEGISLATORS.” It would indeed be the morning of a new day, Americans united throughout the land by common expressions of amazement and pride, breathing full breaths amid surcease from cynicism. The whole world is watching takes on new meaning, not as so often before, seeing now an exemplary way to emulate, the planet suddenly so much safer.

Such headlines would be shocking because they represent a reality so different from that which we know. We become inured to bluster and belligerence as the way of exchange in a culture of arrogance. We breathe in cynicism and no longer recognize our own shortness of breath. More often than not, we hear words, even from our own mouths at times, that seek to justify and explain, rather than to acknowledge the possibility of error and shortcoming in ourselves. Little value is given in practice to what is called in Hebrew, *cheshbon ha'nefesh*/an accounting of the soul. The diminishment of truth in the details of day-to-day living become manifest in the national character and political culture. At the same time, in the absence of humility, claims to an absolute Truth abound, rejecting the presence of others in the vision fulfilled and all along the way.

In the context of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayikra*, the headlines imagined above would not seem shocking, their sentiment emerging naturally from a very different national consciousness. With a very different awareness of the relationship between the people and their leaders, there was a sense of mutual responsibility and transparency expressed through a sacred process of acknowledgement and atonement for wrongdoing, whether of wrongs committed innocently or with intention. The primary content of *Parashat Vayikra*, and of the entire third book of the Torah, *Sefer Vayikra*, concerns offerings as they were to be made in the desert sanctuary and later in the Temples in Jerusalem. Responding with disgust to all the blood and gore of these portions, it is too easy to look smugly at how far we have come in the way of religious expression, and to miss the human dynamics of the sacrificial system whose essence we would do well to reclaim.

Very different from sacrifice as we commonly understand the term, *korban* comes from the root meaning close, *karov*. Always done in a social context, most often as part of a shared meal, bringing near a sin offering was a way of repair that brought people close to each other and to God. In *Parashat Vayikra*, the way of bringing near a sin offering is described in descending order from the High Priest and the other priests, to the judges, to the king, and then to the people. It is recognized implicitly that each one, from those of highest station to the lowest, is

a frail human being who will at times make mistakes. The process of repair is the same for each one. Of life lived before God, social rank makes no difference in the way of atonement. The process begins with self-acknowledgement, each one knowing their own heart to be laid bare before God, *v'hitoadah asher chata aleha/each one shall acknowledge to her or him self that concerning which they have sinned*. Moving from inner awareness to public recognition, an offering was then to be brought near in the context of those gathered in the sanctuary, the process of repair and restitution now to unfold.

A thread of common humanity is woven from priest to prince to people. The shared stake and responsibility of every individual in the wellbeing of the nation is expressed powerfully in the way of response when judges of the highest court sin or commit an error in judgment. When that sin or error is acknowledged by the court and becomes known, offerings are to be brought on behalf of the judges by every tribe, with the participation of every member of the tribe. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains, "these offerings are not to be brought out of the general Temple fund..., but the cost is collected from each individual member of the Tribe; so that the error of the high court was brought directly home to every individual Jewish citizen." There is such a clear reminder to the leaders that their errors affect the people, and yet the people take responsibility to help repair the breach, affirming and encouraging the way of openness. In response to this collective process of repair, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught, "Happy is the generation whose leader seeks atonement for a sin done unintentionally. How must the conscience of the ordinary people be stirred by the conscientiousness of the leader, and if an unintentional sin causes such response, how much the more so for an intentional wrong!"

Working and striving together, may we awake one day to astonishing headlines that sing the coming of a more perfect union.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor