

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Vayikra**

“It shall be a pleasing odor before God.” This line from Leviticus is proof that God is not a vegetarian. One is supposed to take the flesh of an animal and cook it on the altar – not burn it, mind you – just cook it (maybe even grill it – probably medium or medium rare) – as an appropriate offering to God. Now, granted it was the priest and not God who got to eat the steak, but the fact that cooking it would create a pleasing odor before God seems indicative of God’s acceptance of carnivorous eating. I know that people stay awake all night wondering about this, so I thought I would take a moment to make the matter clear – God is okay with steak! And, if you really want to make it a pleasing odor before God, you need to consider basting it at least once with A-1 or Heinz-57 while it is cooking. Let me tell you, those sauces do a lot more than enhance the taste! The aroma is ... is ..., well, it is just Godly!

The text is somewhat outlandish in its blanket statement to make offerings on the altar – as a pleasing Odor before God. Certainly one steak, or one group of steaks smells good, but what about animal after animal? And what of the smell while the animals are waiting to be offered up (cooked)? I really struggle with the notion of over 180,000 animals (as in the dedication of the Temple story in Kings) creating a pleasing odor to God. In fact, I have a harder time believing that the text really is about the sacrifice at all, as I look at the first chapter of Isaiah (10-15), “Hear the word of the Lord, rulers of Sodom; give ear to the Torah of our God, people of Gomorrah. To what purpose are your many sacrifices to me? said the Lord; I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of male goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required you to trample my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense of abomination they are to me ... When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; and, when you make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood.” This does not sound like the purpose of the text is to require the cooking of animals on the altar.

So what is it that God wants, and other than feeding the priests and the poor, of what purpose might these offerings be required? Isaiah and Micah both will tell us that God demands justice, loves mercy and desires us to walk humbly with the outstretched hand of divinity. There is no requirement of ritual in these statements, yet we know, as religious people of all faiths, that despite these prophetic words, we remain tied to ritual, so “tied” that we start defining how religious we are not by what we believe or what work we do, but by how much ritual we perform and how “well” we perform it. Yet, bringing the bigger animal, presenting the more well marbled steak, or preparing the offering on the most ornate or largest B.T.U. gas range have no place in determining the value of the offering.

I think these beginning texts of Leviticus accept that we are a people who demand ritual. And while at some level it is a loose ritual (the one bringing the offering only has to show up with it while the priest then does all the work), it does provide a framework for us with which to affirm and practice our respective faiths. The pleasing odor has nothing to do with what is brought to the altar, and everything to do with “that” something is brought to the altar. The text does argue that it is not just the animal, it can be even a measure of flour – all are equal and all provide a pleasing odor before God. The odor is the scent of satisfaction that comes from people wanting to show up to intentionally participate, it has nothing to do with going through the motions of participation. In this day and age, “God talk” is as

casual as arm chair quarterbacking. One can open mail order catalogues that focus on spirituality and find statues of Jesus in the Lotus position as Buddah, a decoupage tallit, and parodies on the Christian symbol of the fish not only for sale but at bargain prices. While a cute advertising gimmick, we learn from Hebrew National that their hot dogs are more Godly than any other brand. Were we not rooted in a society that handled faith so casually, these marketing ploys could never succeed. I am no religious fanatic. In fact, the opposite, because I really believe that too much "religion" detracts from any real search for truth. Adding A1 to the offering on the altar is no different than so much of what passes for religious behavior and precedent in this world. And the harsh reality is that the same fight between marketers of Heinz 57 and A1 for supremacy of a market share is what we see in the supercessionist arguments religious leaders use claiming that a god who created all of us believes only them to be most right. There is nothing pleasing about the odor of excluding people. Bring the A1, the Heinz 57, the flour, or the turtle dove – but more – bring the full heart -- even if accompanied by an empty pocket – bring these offerings to the altar and lets get back to creating that pleasing odor before God. Shabbat shalom.