**Parshat Va’yikra: Joanne Dickson**

When I was 13 years old many many years ago I was bat mitzvah. This is a coming-of-age ceremony for Jewish children. The ceremony took place in Connecticut where I grew up. Allusions to where I live now are to Mendocino California. 13-year-olds are given a portion of the Torah to learn and to read in Hebrew. My portion was Va’yikra, the first five chapters of Leviticus in the Old Testament.

My Rabbi asked me to interpret this portion when it was read this year. It took a lot of study and I learned a lot. I did the teaching at last Saturday's service. My teaching follows.

Sacrifice – the act of slaughtering an animal or giving up possessions  as an offering to God. The centrality of sacrifices in Ancient Israel is clear, particularly in the opening chapters of the book Leviticus. Todays Torah portion, Va’yikra, details the exact method of bringing sacrifices. Sacrifices were either blood sacrifices (animals) or bloodless offerings (grain and wine). Blood sacrifices were divided into the burnt offerings  in which the whole animal was burnt, guilt offerings (in which part was burnt and part left for the priest) and peace offerings (in which similarly only part of the animal was burnt and the rest eaten in ritually pure conditions). sacrifices are only a part of serving God and need to be accompanied by inner morality.  Maimonides, a medieval Jewish rationalist, argued that God always held sacrifice inferior to prayer and philosophical meditation. However, God understood that the Israelites were used to the animal sacrifices that the surrounding pagan tribes used as the primary way to commune with their gods. As such, in Maimonides' view, it was only natural that Israelites would believe that sacrifice was a necessary part of the relationship between God and man. Maimonides concludes that God's decision to allow sacrifices was a concession to human psychological limitations. It would have been too much to have expected the Israelites to leap from pagan worship to prayer and meditation in one step.

He writes:

"But the custom which was in those days general among men, and the general mode of worship in which the Israelites were brought up consisted of sacrificing animals. It was in accordance with the wisdom and plan of God...that God did not command us to give up and to discontinue all these manners of service. For to obey such a commandment would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used; it would in those days have made the same impression as a prophet would make at present [the 12th Century] if he called us to the service of God and told us in His name, that we should not pray to God nor fast, nor seek His help in time of trouble; that we should serve Him in thought, and not by any action."

The prophets point out that prayer and sacrifices are only a part of serving God and need to be accompanied by inner morality.

In our tiny piece of the planet here on the coast many share food with those are hungry. Making meals to freeze and visit those who are sick is a form of sacrifice.  Contributing to or working for the food bank so that no one need be hungry, these are sacrifices. Kathy, my helper,  has given up so much so she could stay with me. She has made sacrifices that make my life possible. The mentorship program, where individuals help guide students who could not afford to go to college, and their parents did not know how to direct them is a beautiful form of sacrifice. Visiting those who are lonely and sharing ideas is another form of sacrifice. There are many in this community who are compassionate and can sense what others need. They are serving God.

A friend said that the ocean makes her think of God because it seems endless-like God's love and mercy. On the other hand, I know a man whom I would consider imprisoned in his own life.  He started a Hedge fund with good intentions, an honest endeavor that evolved into a Ponzi scheme. He had feelings, a yearning to fulfill what he perceived as his entitlements. Sadly he was not serving God, he lacked inner morality. He is a prisoner  of his own existence. He wanted wanted things, objects which represented wealth and success. What he lacked was conscience.  He once  talked to me of his father's honesty. He admired his father.   He saw that he could steal from from family and friends. Of course they always thought they were doing well because he stole from Peter to pay Paul.  And when there was no more money left  his clients lost all their money. Many people were hurt by his greed. Viakra was also his Torah portion.

Prayer now takes the place of animal sacrifices. "The spiritual challenge of Va’yikra is to make our prayer life as powerful, as intense and as effective as a sacrificial system was for our ancestors."In the words of the spiritual teacher Shefa Gold,"The medicine that Viakra gives us for our disease of alienation from God is referred to as the sacrifices." In this portion we are entreated to engage all our senses, witnessing the power of life and death and then sharing a sacred  meal in the presence of God ."  In our times after praying together, we say kiddush knowing that each bite, that each sip, is also tasted and enjoyed by God.