



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayikra 5771

By Shira Fischer

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One of the most amazing messages of Judaism is the potential for change. Throughout the Jewish year, we communicate the belief that as individuals we can transform ourselves into better people and that the world as a whole can become a better place.

On the individual level, on Yom Kippur we pray with intensity, deny ourselves sustenance and beat our breasts with the conviction that change is possible. And on a daily basis, we bow our heads and recite *tachanun*, a ritual of supplication, marking the potential for personal improvement. We also declare our belief that not just the individual, but the whole world can shift: At Passover, around the seder table, we affirm that slaves can become free and injustice can be righted. We express this potential for large-scale change weekly as well, with the Friday night *kiddush*, which reminds us of the Exodus from Egypt.

Why do we need these reminders of the possibility of change? Shouldn't it be easy enough to just vow to change and follow through? Human nature says no. Our mere verbal pronouncements—from the grandiose (“I will no longer sin,” “I will volunteer in my community,” “I will give more tzedakah”) to the mundane (“I will eat healthier food,” “I will exercise regularly,” “I will practice piano more often”)—do not seem to lead to lasting change. Indeed, most commitments to change are fleeting, like New Year’s resolutions that are forgotten by mid-January.

Parshat Vayikra introduces the elaborate system of ritualized sacrifice,¹ which, in its day, offered the people of Israel a vehicle to strengthen their vows of change. The *chatat*, a “sin-offering” brought after a transgression was committed, did not rectify the deed—the sinner had to deal with the actual issue first—but the offering must have given the person some closure, the ability to let the past go or change direction, as needed. Sacrifices, rising in flames, offered a concrete finality to the past and the opportunity to move forward as a transformed person. They allowed people to open themselves to change on a regular basis, and gave visual as well as tactile and olfactory affirmation that change had occurred.

Though the sacrifices are no longer available to us today, they teach us the importance of having rituals to concretize our belief in change and support our commitments to adhere to the transformations we seek to enact. Post-sacrifice Judaism has included change-inducing rituals in Yom Kippur, Passover, *tachanun* and *kiddush*—from the beating of our breasts to the symbols of the seder table. In our secular efforts at social change and social justice, annual rituals like walkathons, memorial days and the wearing of armbands remind us of the causes we support and the need to take action.

And yet, these rituals are not always as effective as we might hope. Most of us perform them in a perfunctory way and our lives return to the way they were. The prophets, in their day, understood that rituals of repentance were only

¹ Earlier examples of animal and other sacrifices are present in the Torah, but *Vayikra* introduces the ritual details for regular performance of sacrifices: by whom, when, how, what is burnt, what is eaten, etc.

useful inasmuch as they connected to deeper action. Samuel insists that King Saul can't rely on sacrifices to effect religious transformation for him: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen better than the fat of rams."²

The sacrifices served no purpose if one was not actually acting on the greater message, and so too, our contemporary rituals are meaningless unless they are supported by deep efforts to be changed by them and effect change because of them. Repair the World,³ an American organization that aims to "make service a defining part of American Jewish life," suggests that volunteer service can play that role. Repair the World urges Jews to set aside a set period of time for service—such as the year between high school and college—in order to inspire a deep commitment to change for the rest of our lives. For those of us who cannot dedicate a year, we can set aside a regular time—one Sunday a month at a soup kitchen, one evening a week making phone calls for a national or international political cause—to keep ourselves involved, to keep our sleeves rolled up, and to keep reminding ourselves that change in the world is possible.

Though they do not have the visceral power of blood, death and fire that the sacrifices did, these small but recurring checkpoints help us make sure that we don't let the potential for change become theoretical—a distant dream. At an individual level, they can help us put our non-activist selves behind us and commit to being people who pursue justice. On a communal level, they help us cultivate our belief that injustice in the world can be corrected, and set us on the path to make it happen.



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² | Samuel 15:22.

³ *Repair the World*, <http://weprepair.org/>.

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