

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion: *VaYikra*

WHERE ARE OUR ALTARS?

אֲנִי קָרָא אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מֵאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר:
בְּדַבַּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אָדָם כִּי־יִקְרִיב מִכֶּם קֹרְבָן לַיהוָה...

God called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them – “When any of you presents an offering to God...”
(Leviticus 1:1-2)

This week’s Torah portion is the first reading from Leviticus (Hebrew = *Vayikra*), a long book in the middle of the Torah that deals extensively with the animal and grain offerings to God that were a central part of the spiritual life of ancient Jews. Whenever an individual or the community broke a law or committed a sin, part of the process for restoring the person or the community to wholeness entailed bringing a sacrifice to the Temple. The sacrifice served as a sign that the person accepted responsibility for what he or she had done and wanted to set things right.

At the center of the sacrificial system is the altar, the physical place where offerings were made to God.

As people far removed from cultures in which sacrifice makes sense as a form of worship, we search for the meaning that this part of the Torah holds in our lives today. So we ask:

QUESTION: If you had to identify an altar for yourself – a place where you focused on building and repairing your relationship to the things you hold most sacred – where or what would that altar be? How about an altar for the city of New York? For the Jewish community?

It’s important to note that sacrifice was only one part of dealing with improper actions. As the following verses from this week’s Torah portion make clear, when you harm another person, your first response must be to make it up to that person. Only then can you seek to set things right on a spiritual plane:

God spoke to Moses, saying: When a person sins and commits a trespass against God by dealing deceitfully with another person regarding a pledge, or through robbery, or fraud, or by finding something lost and then lying about it...when one has sinned this way and, realizing his guilt, wants to restore that which he got through robbery or fraud, or the pledge that was entrusted to him, or the lost object that he found...he shall repay the principal amount and add a fifth to it. We shall pay it to its owner when he realizes his guilt. Then shall he bring to the priest...a ram without blemish from the flock, or its equivalent, as a guilt offering. The priest shall make expiation on his behalf before God, and he shall be forgiven for whatever he might have done to incur blame.
[Leviticus 5:20-26]