

## Vayikra 5779 "Tamid"

Every spiritual tradition has a concept of 'beginner's mind.' It's grounded in the mystical idea that what we perceive to be reality might not be actual reality but is instead a version of it created by our thoughts, our emotions and our perceptions. If we are able to find a way to quiet that noise, we can start to become truly wise. Beginner's mind is often illustrated by this kind of story:

*A student comes to a famous master and asks for instruction.*

*The master begins to discuss several important topics. But the student interrupts the master in an attempt to impress him and says, "Oh, I already know that."*

*The master then invites the student to have some tea.*

*When the tea is ready, the master pours the tea into a teacup, filling it to the brim, spilling tea over the sides of the cup and onto the table.*

*The student exclaims, "Stop! You can't pour tea into a full cup."*

*The master replies, "Return to me when your cup is empty."*

I've also seen this illustrated by the master putting gas into an already full tank.

But this week I found it in a new iteration that I didn't expect. I receive a daily email from the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and right now we are deep in the tractate *Menahot*.

*Menahot* is not really the most gripping of tractates. Like all the others in the same section, it deals with sacrifices - specifically, the *minhah* sacrifice that was made in the afternoons. It opens by setting out which *menahot* are valid and which are not, and why, and what the penalties for invalid sacrifices would be, in the most painstaking detail. Then it goes on to consider the effect of the other animal sacrifices on *menahot*. Then it sets out which bits of the *minhah* sacrifice can fail to be performed but rendering the *minhah* still valid. And so on.

I remember when Mia was studying the main tractate on sacrifices, *Zevachim* and how difficult she found it - *Menahot* at least has the merit of being vegan, but it's no less exacting in its detail. At rabbinical school, we'd describe it as a tractate that breaks your teeth.

And yet. Hidden deep within it is a real gem that teaches us a real truth that is still applicable to our lives today. Here it is:[*Menahot* 4:4]:

*The absence of the temidim [daily offerings of lambs, one after dawn and before sunset] near does not invalidate the musafim [additional offerings offered on Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and holidays], neither does [the absence of] the musafim invalidate the temidim, neither does the absence of [one of the] musafim invalidate the other musafim. Even if they did not offer the lamb in the morning, they must offer it towards evening.*

It looks like a piece of technical prioritizing about offerings - but it isn't.

I wrote in this week's brochure that at the root of the general word for sacrifices, *korban*, sits the idea of intimacy. A *korban*, the making of a sacrifice, is based on the idea of a quest to feel close. The brochure piece is about closeness with other human beings - but the Torah portion this morning presents sacrifice as a way of getting closer to God - the All That Is, the greatness that surrounds and pervades and transcends our world, reality in its purest and most meaningful form. It is a physical container to express our sometimes incoherent wish for what the Hasidim call *dveikus* - cleaving to God so closely, in every moment, that we become indistinguishable from the greater reality that is everything.

But human beings are only human beings. And so we fluctuate. Our thoughts, our emotions and our perceptions constantly drive us spiritually up and down. One moment we might feel integrated, the next we are all over the place. One moment might feel like a flash of enlightenment, the next, we are doing the laundry. Our spiritual journey is one marked by movement backwards as well as movement forwards.

And that's why we need this Mishnah. Look again at what it tells us:

*The absence of the temidim does not invalidate the musafim...*

The *tamid* was the daily offering made both in the morning and in the evening while the fire on the altar was kept constantly burning. The word *tamid* itself means 'constant' or 'permanent' - so the *tamid* is a symbol of continuity, a seamless relationship with God, a gift that is always being given.

Except that it's clear from the Mishnah that the *tamid* actually isn't a *tamid*, because sometimes it can be absent. How can this be? Well, because human beings fluctuate in the way I just described. We forget, we omit, we lose that feeling of connection. In fact, the only constant is precisely that - we are going to fail in our practice, over and over again! We fall out of our spiritual rhythm in the same way as we sometimes miss our morning workout or are remiss in our promise to weed the garden or feed the birds daily. We mess up *all the time*.

And the whole of the opening of the Mishnah is built on this presumption - but it also gives us a solution. How can we get back in when we have fallen out? *We just get back in. Even if we did not give a tamid - the daily offering - the one that we give on Shabbat or a festival, the musaf offering, will still count. And if we miss out on celebrating Shabbat or a festival, we can still come back to daily practice. And if we forgot to connect in the morning, we can still do so in the evening. And so on, over and over again. There's always the opportunity to find beginner's mind and come back to wisdom. There's always another chance to start over.*

And that's the real secret of the *tamid*. It's not constant in the sense of being constantly given, because the Mishnah is clear that's not the case. Rather, it's constant in the sense of constantly being able to come back to our quest to be more wise and more intimate with what is truly real. Just as we constantly fall out of step, we can constantly return. My teacher Rabbi Jordan Bendat- Appel expresses this in the Hebrew phrase *berahamim tashuv* - 'you will come back in compassion.'

And every time we come back, it's a new experience.

Shabbat shalom.