

Babette's Feast and the Concept of Korban

Parashat Vayikra, Leviticus, Chapters 1-5 | March 10, 2022

What is the best film about food ever made? In the opinion of many, it is a Danish movie, based on a short story of the same name: *Babette's Feast*. The story depicts two elderly sisters living as part of an ascetic religious community who take in Babette, a woman who once worked as a chef in France. Some years later, Babette wins the lottery, and spends all of her money on a feast celebrating the birthday of her hosts' late father, a religious leader. The members of this sect come to the meal in trepidation, some vowing not to enjoy it. But despite themselves, they are joined together through food and faith, and in the end, they leave the meal in fellowship, linking hands, singing hymns. The writer J. Bryan Lowder reflected:

My favorite scene in the film comes after the last, glistening course has been served, when she finally sits for a moment in the kitchen, her skin dewy from work, quietly sipping a glass of wine. The satisfaction on her face is the kind that can only come from the knowledge that you have created something that sustains both the bodies and the spirits of the people in your care. Indeed, Babette's story is an argument for the idea that spending money, time, and energy cooking for friends is the best gift a home cook can give...

The film is rightly beloved, and I believe that an understanding of what it means to appreciate both body and spirit can help us address one of the most complex subjects in the Torah.

The Book of Leviticus is about what is commonly called "animal sacrifice," a concept utterly alien to many today, but one which traditional Judaism reveres, praying for its ultimate return to Jerusalem. We must, however, begin by noting that never is our subject called "sacrifice" in the Bible. What is emphasized is not a giving up of

something. The word in Hebrew is "korban." That is what is brought on the altar. And the root of "korban" is "karov," "close." Thus the second verse in Leviticus:

Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When any man of you bring near a korban unto the Lord, ye shall bring your offering of the domesticated animal, of the cattle or of the flock. (Leviticus 1:2)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch correctly writes that *korban*

is never to be understood as a gift or a present. It is found solely in the context of man's relationship to God and can only be understood on the basis of the meaning of the root *karov*. The meaning of *karov* is in accord with its plain sense: to draw closer, to arrive at a close relationship with someone.

But how is this achieved? Describing the bringing of a bull as an offering, we are told:

And he shall slaughter the bullock before the Lord, and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall present the blood and dash the blood round about against the altar that is at the door of the tent of meeting. (Leviticus 1:5)

A *korban* involving the death of an animal somehow brings us closer to God, and this means that in understanding Leviticus, we must first seek to understand ourselves. Judaism proclaims that human beings possess a soul that sets us apart from the rest of creation. This soul is immortal, continuing to live long after the body has died. But in embracing this message, some religious thinkers often assumed much more: that *only* the soul is the essence of our identity and that the body is a mere cloak, or appendage, or shell for the soul. But this is not,

I believe, the traditional Jewish view. Every morning, Jews pray:

My Lord, the soul You have placed in me is pure. You created it, fashioned it, and breathed it within me. You will in the future take it from me, and return it to me in the end of days.

Who is the “me” in which the soul is placed? It is the body. Both body and soul make us who we are. When, as children, we seek solace in our mothers’ arms, it is not only an appendage we are embracing. When our little children lie asleep, it is not their souls we caress in their cribs. And when we are in love, it is not only our spouse’s soul to which we are attracted. Death is mourned because it is a cleaving of body and soul, and Judaism’s ultimate eschatological yearning is the resurrection of the dead, the restoration of soul to body. The Catholic theologian Richard John Neuhaus, in a written reflection on his own encounter with disease, describes how his temporary sojourn at death’s door allowed him to realize just how important his body is to his sense of self.

The notion of some of the ancients and the Enlightenment rationalists that the essential “I” is not involved in the death of this body struck me as preposterous... [I]t is this body, now in pitiful ruins, that participated in the yearnings of my loves, the bracing joy of early morning walks... and all those nights of languorously falling into sleep... This body and I, this body that is inseparable from me, together we have been this life.

Neuhaus put it accurately and exquisitely. As much as we may want to transcend our physical selves, we cannot ignore the fact that our bodies are an essential aspect of our humanity. We are an amalgam of the mortal and the immortal, and for the Rabbis, both body and soul are essential. Although Rabbinic Judaism has always insisted on the immortality of the soul, our liturgy stresses that God is “*Mechaye haMeitim*,” “He Who Will Ultimately Resurrect the Dead,” for it is only then that we can become fully ourselves once more. Body and

soul, together, make us, *us*. When Adam is created, he is described in Genesis as “*nefesh chayah*,” which literally means “a living being;” the rabbis also translated it as an “ensouled animal.” We are akin to animals, but also different from them. And what this means is that to witness death, to witness a physical end of a life, albeit that of an animal, is to think about our own mortality; but to be blessed with a soul is to have the ability to respond spiritually to that very reminder. Thus, the theologian Michael Wyschogrod writes that

Sacrificial Judaism brings the truth of human existence into the Temple. It does not leave it outside its portals.

Korban, in other words, forces us to face the fact of our own physicality, and of our own mortality. Wyschogrod adds:

Enlightened religion recoils with horror from the thought of sacrifice, preferring a spotless house of worship filled with organ music and exquisitely polite behavior. The price paid for such decorum is that the worshiper must leave the most problematic part of his self outside the temple, to reclaim it when the service is over and to live with it unencumbered by sanctification. Religion ought not to demand such a dismemberment of man.

Wyschogrod’s point is that in the Tabernacle and Temple, we recognize that we are both body and soul; mortal and immortal; and *korban* asks us not to deny our mortality, but to allow it to motivate us, to see the life we have as a gift, and to remind us that we live by the grace of God. This ultimately is how *korban* makes us *karov*; that is how it draws us closer to God.

With this in mind, let us consider the first sort of offering described in Leviticus: the *olah*, in which the entire animal is offered on the altar:

...and the priest shall offer it entirely on the altar, an *olah* offered in fire, a sweet savour unto the Lord. (Leviticus 1:9)

The word “*olah*,” “burnt offering” or “elevation offering,” is found in the tale of the *Akeida*, the Binding of Isaac. There, the word “*olah*” appears again and again.

When the Temple is established in Jerusalem, the altar occupies, according to tradition, the precise site where Isaac, and then ultimately the ram, were offered. Imagine a Jew entering the magnificent edifice of the Temple in Jerusalem. The site has been altered since the *Akeida*. But this Jew is imitating his ancestor Abraham’s ascent all the same. And when he stands before the altar with an animal as an offering, he remembers again Abraham’s prayer: “May God provide us the ram.” He knows that here, God *has* provided the ram, and thus this Jew descends the mount transformed, existentially akin to Abraham returning from Mount Moriah; his attitude to life is changed, for he understands that every moment he has on Earth is itself, as it was for Isaac, a lease on life.

Korban, then, relates to the complex nature of human existence, and this is true about many ritual requirements in the Bible. Scripture’s many commandments, or *mitzvot*, relate not merely to belief, but to action. For only through dedicated action are body and soul joined. As the philosopher Eliezer Berkovits put it, “In the *mitzvah* man is one and as a whole he relates himself to the One God.” Moreover: because we are body and soul, when the physical and spiritual act in unison, the mundane can be made holy. That is why Judaism has so many rituals that pertain to food—because we see eating as an extraordinary opportunity for sanctity. Animals eat, but for them it is a brute, instinctive act. Only human beings can act with both spirit and body; only through a religious ritual, such as the Seder, are the seemingly animalistic act of ingesting transformed into something simultaneously sacred, as well as human.

The writer Rod Dreher notes how in the film *Babette’s Feast*,

Just prior to the dinner, we saw that the elderly villagers were at each other’s throats, asserting past grievances and grudges against each other. But at the end, they leave Babette’s feast merry and harmonious, and dance again in a circle around the village well, harmony and

fellowship restored, praising God. All because of the grace that came to them through Babette’s feast.

Through the Torah, feasting itself can become an opportunity for faith and fellowship. And this, in turn, brings us to another *korban*, described at the beginning of chapter 3:

If his offering be a shelamim... (Leviticus 3:1)

“*Shelamim*,” whose root is “*shalom*,” “peace,” is usually translated as “peace offering.”

Unlike the *olah*, the *shelamim* is eaten; part is placed on the altar, part given to the priests, and a portion is eaten in Jerusalem by the one who brought it. In biblical society, offering and eating the *shelamim* is the primary means of celebration, especially during holidays. And as Deuteronomy will detail, when the Israelites gather at the Temple for the festivals, they are obligated to invite the needy into their *shelamim* feasts:

And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates. (Deuteronomy 16:14)

This togetherness, perhaps, gives the peace offering its name, as an animalistic urge to eat is transformed into something sacred. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote:

When one eats sacrificial meat, he also feeds strangers, orphans, and widows. Such eating constitutes not only religious worship, but also an act of social morality: including needy people in the circle of one’s enjoyment. Friendship and love are embodied in physiological functions through which flesh and blood human beings demonstrate their belonging to a society and their connectedness to others.

Shelamim, then, is a form of dining with the Divine and with one's fellow man. Thus, the *olah* reminds us of the *Akeida*, and the *shelamim* sanctifies food through faith.

The worldview of Leviticus seems outmoded to many; but the truth is that today many eat meat without even thinking about its source, and they certainly rarely give no heed to their own mortality when they do so. If there is a time for the lessons of Leviticus, it is our age, for we live a time of foodies, and a celebration of food and of celebrity chefs. I, too, enjoy watching shows such as *Chef's Table* and documentaries like *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. But there is an element of hedonism at times in today's food obsession.

J. Bryan Lowder, in his essay on *Babette's Feast*, notes that Babette

...cooks not to impress or to show off (indeed, she *never* appears in the dining room), but rather to facilitate the alchemy that transforms good food into great fellowship. This is an ethic that is all too rare. We live in a food culture dominated by the notion that cooking is a performance art, something that you wow people with from behind the island of your open-concept kitchen as if you were the host of your own Food Network show. The covers of glossy cooking magazines exhort you to "impress your friends" with this or that new technique, while "celebrity chefs" by their very existence make the argument that a cook's personality is more important than her food.

Babette thus shows the way toward an exalted eating, one which brings us together. For Judaism, it is ultimately God that must be the glue of that relationship. That is why the peace offering eaten with friends and strangers in the precincts of the Temple is so sublime. Leon Kass, another appreciator of *Babette's Feast*, describes its conclusion with an appreciation of human beings having both bodies and souls. Kass writes:

Thanks to genius and taste, thanks to the extreme generosity and openness of both host and guest, the visage of the eternal shows itself in the midst of the most temporal, as superb food and wine nourish also the spiritual hungers of the assembled. It is a transcendent moment of grace: Souls and bodies nourished, people are reconciled, united as one, imbued with the old spirit, awake to the presence of the divine.

That is ultimately what certain forms of *korban* achieve. That is what we long to re-experience. And it is for this that ultimately ask for at the Seder, when we recall the holiday offerings in the Temple, and we pray "Next year in Jerusalem."

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik mentions the Passover Seder as a prime example of sanctifying the act of eating. What are other Jewish rituals that perform the same function? In what ways are they similar to, or different from, the Seder.
2. Today, Jewish prayer times are meant to parallel the moments in the day when the communal offerings were brought in the Temple. Reflecting on Rabbi Soloveichik's ideas about body, soul, and mortality, what are some ways we can make our prayer experience re-capture some of the drama and intensity of bringing a *korban*?