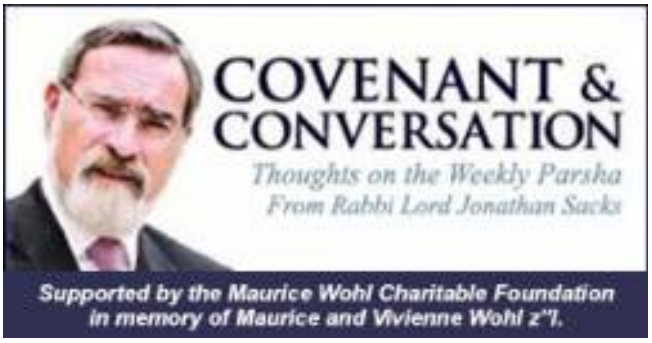
In this Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** *by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*
- **The Guiding Light** *by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*
- **Outlooks & Insights** *by Rabbi Zev Leff*
- **Shem MiShmuel** *by Rabbi Zvi Belovski*



The Pursuit of Meaning

The American Declaration of Independence speaks of the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Recently, following the pioneering work of Martin Seligman, founder of Positive Psychology, there have hundreds of books on happiness. Yet there is something more fundamental still to the sense of a life well-lived, namely, *meaning*. The two seem similar. It's easy to suppose that people who find meaning are happy, and people who are happy have found meaning. But the two are not the same, nor do they always overlap.

Happiness is largely a matter of satisfying needs and wants. Meaning, by contrast, is about a sense of purpose in life, especially by making positive contributions to the lives of others. Happiness is largely about how you feel in the present. Meaning is about how you judge your life as a whole: past, present and future.

Happiness is associated with *taking*, meaning with *giving*. Individuals who suffer stress, worry or anxiety are not happy, but they may be living lives rich with meaning. Past misfortunes reduce present happiness, but people often connect such moments with the discovery of meaning. Happiness is not unique to humans. Animals also experience contentment when their wants and needs are satisfied. But meaning is a distinctively human phenomenon. It has to do not with *nature* but with *culture*. It is not about what happens to us, but about *how we interpret* what happens to us. There can be happiness without meaning, and there can be meaning in the absence of happiness, even in the midst of darkness and pain.[1]

In a fascinating article in *The Atlantic*, 'There's more to life than being happy,'[2] Emily Smith argued that the pursuit of happiness can result in a relatively shallow, self-absorbed, even selfish life. What makes the pursuit of meaning different is that it is about the search for something larger than the self.

No one did more to put the question of meaning into modern discourse than the late Viktor Frankl, who has figured prominently in this year's Covenant and Conversation essays on spirituality. In the three years he spent in Auschwitz, Frankl

survived and helped others to survive by helping them to discover a purpose in life even in the midst of hell on earth. It was there that he formulated the ideas he later turned into a new type of psychotherapy based on what he called "man's search for meaning." His book of that title, written in the course of nine days in 1946, has sold more than ten million copies throughout the world, and ranks as one of the most influential works of the twentieth century.

Frankl knew that in the camps, those who lost the will to live died. He tells of how he helped two individuals to find a reason to survive. One, a woman, had a child waiting for her in another country. Another had written the first volumes of a series of travel books, and there were others yet to write. Both therefore had a reason to live.

Frankl used to say that the way to find meaning was not to ask what we want from life. Instead we should ask what life wants from us. We are each, he said, unique: in our gifts, our abilities, our skills and talents, and in the circumstances of our life. For each of us, then, there is a task only we can do. This does not mean that we are better than others. But if we believe we are here for a reason, then there is a *tikkun*, a mending, only we can perform, a fragment of light only we can redeem, an act of kindness or courage or generosity or hospitality, even a word of encouragement or a smile, only we can perform, because we are here, in this place, at this time, facing this person at this moment in their lives.

"Life is a task," he used to say, and added, "The religious man differs from the apparently irreligious man only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission." He or she is aware of being summoned, called, by a Source. "For thousands of years that source has been called God."[3]

That is the significance of the word that gives our parsha, and the third book of the Torah, its name: *Vayikra*, "And He called." The precise meaning of this opening verse is difficult to understand. Literally translated it reads: "And He called to Moses, and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying ..." The first phrase seems to be redundant. If we are told that God spoke to Moses, why say in addition, "And He called"? Rashi explains as follows:

> *And He called to Moses:* Every [time God communicated with Moses, whether signalled by the expression] "And He spoke", or "and He said", or "and He commanded", it was always preceded by [God] calling [to Moses by name].[4] "Calling" is an expression of endearment. It is the expression employed by the ministering angels, as it says, "And one called to the other..." (Isa. 6:3).

Vayikra, Rashi is telling us, means *to be called to a task in love*. This is the source of one of the key ideas of Western thought, namely the concept of a vocation or a calling, that is, the choice of a career or way of life not just because you want to do it, or because it offers certain benefits, but because you feel *summoned* to it. You feel this is your meaning and mission in life. This is what you were placed on earth to do.

There are many such calls in *Tanakh*. There was the call Abraham heard to leave his land and family. There was the call to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:4). There was the one experienced by Isaiah when he saw in a mystical vision God enthroned and surrounded by angels:

> Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

One of the most touching is the story of the young Samuel, dedicated by his mother Hannah to serve in the sanctuary at Shiloh where he acted as an assistant to Eli the priest. In bed at night he heard a voice calling his name. He assumed it was Eli. He ran to see what he wanted but Eli told him he had not called. This happened a second time and then a third, and by then Eli realised that it was God calling the child. He told Samuel that the next time the voice called his name, he should reply, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' It did not occur to the child that it might be God summoning him to a mission, but it was. Thus began his career as a prophet, judge and anointer of Israel's first two kings, Saul and David (1 Samuel 3).

When we see a wrong to be righted, a sickness to be healed, a need to be met, and we feel it speaking to us, that is when we come as close as we can in a post-prophetic age to hearing *Vayikra*, God's call. And why does the word appear here, at the beginning of the third and central book of the Torah? Because the book of Vayikra is about sacrifices, and a vocation is about sacrifices. *We are willing to make sacrifices when we feel they are part of the task we are called on to do.*

From the perspective of eternity we may sometimes be overwhelmed by a sense of our own insignificance. We are no more than a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea shore, dust on the surface of infinity. *Yet we are here because God wanted us to be, because there is a task He wants us to perform.* The search for meaning is the quest for this task.

Each of us is unique. Even genetically identical twins are different. There are things only we can do, we who are what we are, in this time, this place and these circumstances. For each of us God has a task: work to perform, a kindness to show, a gift to give, love to share, loneliness to ease, pain to heal, or broken lives to help mend. Discerning that task, hearing *Vayikra*, God's call, is one of the great spiritual challenges for each of us.

How do we know what it is? Some years ago, in *To Heal a Fractured World*, I offered this as a guide, and it still seems to me to make sense: Where what we want to do meets what needs to be done, that is where God wants us to be.

1. See Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer Aaker, and Emily N.Garbinsky, 'Some Key Differences between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life,' Journal of Positive Psychology 2013, Vol. 8, Issue 6, Pages 505-516.
2. Emily Smith, 'There's more to life than being happy,' The Atlantic, 9 Jan. 2013.
3. Viktor Frankl, The Doctor and the Soul: from Psychotherapy to Logotherapy, New York: A.A. Knopf, 1965, 13.
4. Rashi to Vayikra 1:1.

Being Trustworthy

> **Vayikra, 5:21:** "If a soul will sin and commit a treachery against God by lying to his comrade regarding a pledge or a loan or a robbery; or by defrauding his comrade…"
> **Rashi, 5:21, Dh: Nefesh:** "Rebbe Akiva says, 'what do [the words] 'commit a treachery against Hashem' come to teach? Because for every lender and borrower or every legal interaction...he only does so with witnesses and a contract. Therefore, at a time when he denies [the loan or pledge], he contradicts witnesses and a contract. However, [with regards to] the one who deposits something by his friend, and does not want anyone to know about it [and there are no human witnesses], when he denies the loan [in such a case] he is contradicting the third party between the [God]."

The Torah outlines the required atonement for various sins pertaining to stealing. One of them is where a person gives his friend something to guard and when the owner requests it back, his 'friend' denies that he ever received such a deposit. The Torah describes his dishonest action as 'treachery against God'. We know that stealing is a sin in the category of inter-personal relations, so why is it primarily described as treachery against God as opposed to treachery against the owner of the item?

This question is raised by Rebbi Akiva in the Torat Kohanim, cited by Rashi here. Rashi explains: When someone gives his fellow a loan, he usually arranges witnesses to the handing over of the money, or he draws up a document which witnesses sign, attesting to the loan. In any business deal, there is a contract or document certifying the details of the transaction. Therefore, if one lends money to his fellow, and the borrower later denies that he was ever given money, the lender can prove that the loan took place and the borrower will not be able to deny it. In such cases, the defendant who denies the debt will be challenging the witnesses who witnessed the transaction or signed the document.

However, when one asks his friend to do him a favor and guard an article of value, he does not bother getting witnesses or having a contract drawn up because he trusts his fellow. Only one other 'Party' knows about this private arrangement – God. Consequently, when the watchman denies the deposit, in such a situation, he is described as contradicting the "Third Party between them" – God. Consequently, the Torah teaches that he is indeed acting "treacherously" against God by contradicting His testimony.

We learn from here that a person must always be aware that his actions are being witnessed by God even if nobody else is aware of them. We can make a an all the more so argument that when other people are also aware of a person's

dishonest actions, then the sin against God is multiplied because it constitutes a desecration of God's name.

In this vein, Rabbi Aaron Lopianksy in his excellent book, 'Ben Torah for Life', speaks very strongly about common 'business' practices that are not straight but are often employed sadly even by 'observant' Jews. He tells the following story to provide an example of this behavior. He refers to an acquaintance (Mr Cohen) who is in a field that requires many service suppliers. One of these suppliers is a non-Jew (Bob) who had previously not done any business with Jews apart from Mr Cohen. Bob then began servicing additional observant Jewish clients. Bob told Mr Cohen that a new observant Jewish client called him after receiving his bill. Although this client had previously agreed to a price, after he received the receipt of the agreed upon bill, he now called Bob and proposed settling the bill at seventy cents on the dollar, even though he was not in any financial need. Bob then told Mr Cohen that this happened with his other new Jewish customers. Mr Cohen called up the new Jewish client and asked him if he realized what kind of a desecration of God's name he was making. The reply was, "that's what everyone does."[1] Of course, that logic does not justify acting in such a manner, and we also know the ultimately a person does not gain from dishonest practices. Most significantly, the impression it gives of how so-called observant Jews act is very negative with potentially damaging consequences

Happily, Rabbi Lopiansky also relates the opposite kind of stories where honest behavior by observant Jews reaped incredible benefits.[2] He recounts a story from the years of the Holocaust about Rabbi Moshe Zupnik who was a German born student of the Mir. He was deeply involved in the Mir's efforts to escape Europe and go to Japan. The most difficult part of the escape was to obtain transit visas to Japan. There was a Japanese consul in Kovno, the famous Mr Sugihara who agreed to issue visas even though he was instructed not to do so. The problem was that it was physically impossible for him to issue all the visas in the short time available. Rav Zupnik asked him if he could teach him how to fill out the paperwork so he could help. He agreed but the two of them were still unable to work fast enough.

Then a remarkable thing happened. The consul's secretary was a German Gestapo agent names Wolfgang Gudze. To their great surprise he offered to help with the paperwork. In the few days left, the three of them (a Japanese consul, a Mir bochur and a Nazi!) managed to issued 2400 visas. Needless to say, the Gestapo agent could have easily stopped the whole process, and he was risking everything by helping Jews. Before he left, he told Rav Zupnik, "I have great respect for your kind" (ie. Observant Jews). Rabbi Lopiansky observes that this means that in his earlier years, he had had enough interaction with religious Jews and saw enough to admire and respect, that he would risk his life to help them. Evidently, he was not impressed by their observance of Mitzvot between man and God, such as tefillin or Shabbat. Rather, their behavior in the realm of inter-personal relationships such as honesty, integrity and friendliness made such a

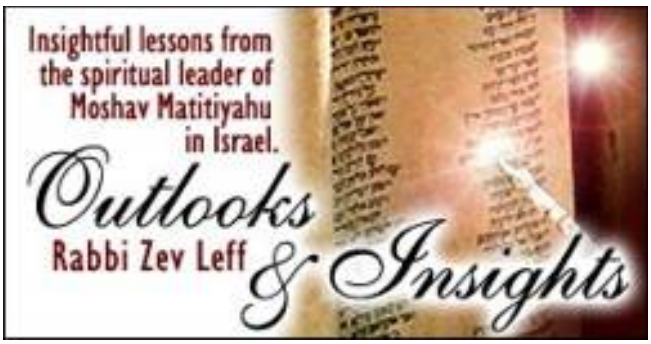
wonderful impression that ultimately resulted in thousands of lives being saved.

Rabbi Lopiansky dramatically ends this account with a theoretical but perfectly possible vision of the consequences of this story for the honest Jew who may have so impressed the Nazi:

> "As an epilogue, I picture a Yekkishe [German] accountant arriving in Heaven after one hundred and twenty years. Being a good accountant, he has tallied his Mitzvot and aveirot [sins] and expects a three-star motel in Gan Eden. As he nears the heavenly gates, he sees a huge commotion and a big banner, "Welcome to the savior of the Torah World." He is shocked; did he even save any one person, let along the entire Torah World?"
>
> Yes! When he had gone about his work quietly and calmly, treating everyone with dignity, honest to a fault, faithful to his commitments and consistent in his Mitzva observance he in fact was projecting Hashem's great name. He projected it so intensely that all his clients - even one who would soon become a Gestapo officer – had to acknowledge that this nation is a special nation. Such a "low key" activity and yet, such a grand result!"

May we all merit to be trustworthy to our fellow and to God.

1. Ben Torah for Life, p.102.
2. Ibid, pp.98-100.



The Gates of Prayer

> *"And God called to Moses..."*
> (Leviticus 1:1)

Rosh in his commentary to the Torah explains that the *aleph* in the word *vayikra,* with which the third book of Torah begins, is reduced in size to reflect the humility of Moses. Remaining to be understood is why this hint to Moses' humility is placed specifically at the beginning of the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus opens with the numerous and complex laws concerning the Temple sacrifices. With the destruction of the Temple, prayer – *avodah* (service) of the heart – replaced the *avodah* of the sacrifices. Yet in the Talmud (Berachos 32b) we are informed that from the time the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were also locked. But the gates of tears were not locked. Rashi explains that the gates of tears refers to another type of prayer – prayer with tears.

Thus we learn that there are two distinct types of prayer – prayer with tears and prayer without tears. Let us examine these two types.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (in Nefesh HaChaim) describes how God created the world with an

intricate system of spiritual powers, through which God's bounty and influence is brought into the physical world. This system is activated by Torah learning, Mitzvot and prayer. God put us into this physical world so that we could earn the ultimate spiritual reward which He desires to bestow upon us – an intimate relationship with Him.

We do not simply earn this reward. Rather we create that relationship through our actions in this world. By learning Torah, doing Mitzvot and praying, we furnish the energy to activate the framework through which God relates to this world.

POWER OF BLESSING`

It is in this context that the Talmud says (Berachos 7a) that "God prays." Rashbah explains that God's desire is to bestow His Divine benevolence upon us. But He has decreed that we must initiate this relationship. It is as if He prays for us to do our part so that He can fulfill His true desires. When we pray to "give power to God," it is this to which we refer. By fulfilling the conditions He has set, we give, as it were, the power to God to shower His bounty upon us.

Berachah ("blessing"), the Rashbah continues, refers to something which increases, enhances and intensifies. (A *breichah,* for instance, is a stream in which the flow of water is constantly increasing and intensifying). Our *berachah* is a means to open up the conduits of God's good to the world by entering into a relationship with Him. When one makes a blessing before he eats, he activates those spiritual realms through which God provides food and opens wider the conduits of God's bounty. He thereby replenishes that which he is eating. On the other hand, one who does not make a blessing is like a thief, for he does not compensate for what he removes from the world (Talmud – Berachos 35a).

Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch (in Shiurei Da'as on the offerings) shows how the sacrifices served to unite and elevate all mundane powers toward the service of God, and thereby activated the system God created to bring the world to fulfillment of His purpose. Maharal adds that the greatest power to activate the spiritual realms emanated from the Temple, and with its destruction those specific gates were locked. (One can still penetrate even locked gates but only with great effort and difficulty.)

PRAYER OF TEARS

There is, however, another type of prayer that was not affected by the destruction of the Temple – the passive prayer of tears and submission. In this context, *berachah* has a totally different connotation. The Jew stands before God and bends his knee and says:

> "*Baruch* – You, God, are the source of all blessing and without You I don't even have a leg to stand on. I bend my knees in recognition of this. *Atah* – It is you, God, and not I, who can provide for my very existence and for my most basic needs."

At the beginning of the Amidah, which replaced the Temple offerings, the Jew bows his body in total subjugation and submission as he proclaims these words. But once he recognizes this fact and submits himself into God's hands and calls upon

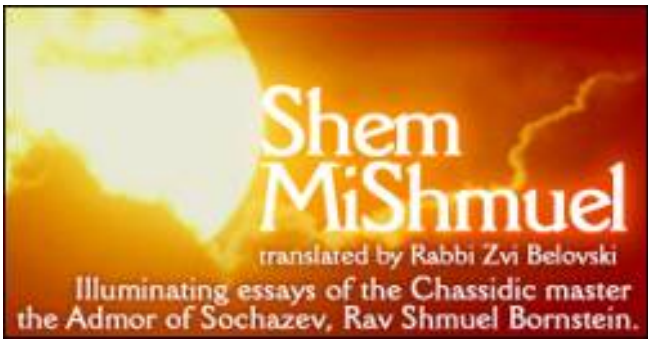
His name – then he can stand erect knowing that God is his support. This is the prayer of tears, a passive, yet very potent power.

All of prayer expresses this idea: *"Heal us God and we will be healed"* is not only an entreaty but also a statement of dependence and submission. Even when the offerings were still brought and were offered with the intention of affecting the celestial realms and opening the conduits of God's blessing, this attitude of complete submission was still part of the offering. Both Nachmanides and Sefer HaChinuch explain that one must identify with the animal being slaughtered as an act of self-negation and submission to God.

Rabbi Simchah Bunim of P'shis'cha said that even though the gates of tears remain open, nevertheless gates are necessary to prevent improper tears from entering. The prayer of tears must be composed of tears of hope, trust and faith that God will help – not tears of depression, dejection or despair.

The book of Leviticus, which details the Temple offerings, begins with a hint to Moses' humility because all *avodah* - whether *avodah* of the heart or that of the offerings – requires self-negation and submission. It requires, even in its active form, a realization that ultimately all emanates from God and all that we do is, in the final analysis, only an expression of submission to God's will.

For this, one needs humility. Hence, the small *aleph* - both a sign of humility and the letter which represents God's oneness and unity. It is with this word: *Vayikra,* with its small *aleph,* that God calls to man to serve Him both actively and passively, to bring the world to its completion.



An Offering of Fine Flour

The entire Torah portion is devoted to describing the various offerings that were brought by *klal Yisrael* in the Mishkan and later in the Beis HaMikdash (Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. Let us try, through the wisdom of our Sages, to gain an understanding of the atonement extended by these offerings:

> And let him return to God, and He will have mercy upon him (Yeshayahu 55:7) - there is a dispute between the Rabbis and Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: The Rabbis say that God showed every variety of atonement to Avraham Avinu, except for the tenth of an *eifah* measure of fine flour. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said that God showed even the flour offering to Avraham Avinu...
>
> And to our God, for He forgives profusely (ibid.) - Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon said in the name of Rabbi Zeira, "God will even extend [literally, 'overlook'] to us one extra

> atonement of His own; this is the tenth of an eifah of fine flour." (Vayikra Rabbah 3:3)

Some explanation is needed here to understand the context of the midrash. In Parashas Lech Lecha, Avraham had a vision known as the *Bris bein HaBesarim* (Covenant between the Parts), in which he was shown a variety of animals divided into pieces. This has many interpretations, one of which is that Avraham saw all of the offering which would eventually provide atonement for his descendants. The Rabbis in the above midrash dispute whether or not the flour offerings brought for certain sins were included in the vision.

OIL AND FRANKINCENSE

This flour offering consisted of just one-tenth of an *eifah* of flour. There was no oil or frankincense accompanying it, as it was the plain offering brought by a sinner. To understand this more clearly, let us consider two other midrashim:

> [What lies behind the various laws of the flour offering?] One should not be tempted to say, "I'll go and do some dreadful things, and then I'll bring a flour offering on a pan [drenched with oil], and God will love me." Instead, God says to him, "My son, why did you not drench your deeds with words of Torah?" [For then the oil would have some meaning,] for oil always means Torah and good deeds... (Ibid., 7)

So when the Torah mandates that no oil be applied to the offering, this symbolizes the sinner's lowly state. His acts are not imbued with Torah and good deeds, and so he must bring dry flour. With respect to the frankincense, we learn that in the case of the offering of a *sotah* (a woman suspected of adultery):

> ...he shall pour no oil upon it, nor put frankincense on it...(Bemidbar 5:15)
>
> Nor put frankincense on it - as the frankincense is a remembrance of the Matriarchs, as the verse says, ...I will go and take myself to the mountain of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense (Shir HaShirim 4:6). The mountain of myrrh - this represents the Patriarchs. The hill of frankincense - this represents the Matriarchs. (Bemidbar Rabbah 9:13)

We may assume that the symbolism of frankincense is universal; wherever it is required, the character of the Matriarchs is implied, and wherever it is absent, their holy character is absent. Armed with all of this information - that our flour offering lacks oil and frankincense and what this lack symbolizes - we may now proceed to understand the original midrash.

CHESED

It should be obvious that the entire system of offerings was a great gift from God, an act of *chesed* extended by Him to us. In reality, the sinner deserves to be treated with strict judgment and receive the punishment, often the death penalty, which was mandated by the Torah for his heinous act. Instead, God extends His grace to us and provides us with various means of atonement, particularly the animal and plant offerings which were brought to the Beis HaMikdash. We now

understand why it was Avraham Avinu, rather than either of the other *Avos*, who was shown a vision of the offerings, for it was he who exemplified the characteristic of *chesed*, which the offerings so strongly represent.

This leads us to the plain flour offering. We have already seen that this offering had neither oil nor frankincense to accompany it, symbolizing the fact that it was an atonement for a person who possessed neither Torah or good deeds (no oil), nor any merit remaining from the Patriarchs or Matriarchs (no frankincense). For such a person, it is possible that the Divine *chesed* is insufficient to provide him with atonement, for he has so very little of his own merit.

It is important to realize that the *chesed* of God is not arbitrary. It is not simply absolution for every behavior, however appalling. The *chesed* must have some relationship to *din* (Divine judgment); that is, while the recipient's deeds would not survive close scrutiny, he must at least merit God's grace. Without this condition, the *chesed* of God would simply be a license to do anything, as one would always be confident of God's later forgiveness. Indeed, even with respect to Avraham, the man of *chesed*, we see that God says:

> For I know him, that he will instruct his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of God to do justice and judgment... (Bereishis 15:19)

Avraham realized that man cannot live without meriting the *chesed* of God. He thus commanded his family "to do justice and judgment." As such, according to the view of the Rabbis in the midrash, God did not show Avraham the flour offering in his vision, for the atonement it offered went beyond his purview of the limits of Divine *chesed*, as it extended credit even to the most unworthy people.

> On the other hand, according to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, God did show the flour offering to Avraham. This is a slightly different way of looking at the issue. It is obvious that the flour offering was brought by the sinner *after* he had atoned, for if not, the offering of an evil person is an abomination... (Mishlei 15:8)

The person has realized the wickedness of his ways and has started on the road back to God; he is no longer entirely outside the system and is once again worthy of God's *chesed*. Although he has neither Torah nor good deeds to his name as yet, we may assume that his initial impetus to repent qualifies him for Divine consideration. This corresponds to one aspect of Avraham's life of *chesed*, in which he strove to bring even the most distant people toward an appreciation of God. As we learn, Avraham left his birthplace with all of his family and possessions, together with:

> ...the souls they had made in Charan... (Bereishis 12:5)
>
> The souls they had made in Charan - whom they had brought under the wings of the Divine Presence. Avraham converted the men; Sarah converted the women... (Rashi loc. cit.)

So according to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the *chesed* extended to the sinner with no apparent merits was still compatible with the worldview of Avraham, and thus God showed him the flour offering in his vision. It remains for us to consider the last section of the midrash with which we began:

> Rabbi Yehudah bar Simon said in the name of Rabbi Zeira, "God will even extend [literally, 'overlook'] to us one extra atonement of His own; this is the tenth of an *eifah* of fine flour." (Vayikra Rabbah 3:3)

This view considers the matter from yet another perspective: even without *teshuvah*, God extends a special gift to every Jew. This gift is an inherent Godliness which is always present within each of us and enables us to receive Divine *chesed regardless* of any other factors. Thus, when we sin we are always able to benefit from God's beneficence, irrespective of our current mind-set. This is the extra atonement which God gives to each of us.

The message this teaches us is obvious: there is always hope. However far a Jew is from his Creator, however few his merits, however devoid he may be of Torah and good deeds, there is hope. God will never forsake any individual. All we have to do is turn our hearts toward Him and resolve to begin the journey back to observance and holiness. Then God will surely extend his *chesed* and deal kindly with us.